

Dying Wish

by foreverx

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Summary: In an alternate universe, psychiatrist Dr. Mulder helps his new patient, Agent Scully find out what happened to her long lost sister.

Dying Wish

[dynwish.html](http://www.fanfiction.net/dynwish.html)

Summary: A dying wish catapults Mulder into an alternate universe; one in which he never had cause to join the FBI. Still, not all is well in Mulderland.

Spoiler: End Game

Ingredients: Conspiracy, UST, angst, violence, and a few bad words.

Rated: PG

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"DYING WISH" by Fran Glass aka ForeverX

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Chapter 1

February 3, 1995

> Somewhere In Alaska <br> 10:34 p.m.

A large, dark spot lay in the still, white snow. With eyes swollen shut and searing with pain, some minor relief was found in the coldness of snow that he had scooped over them. It hadn't been a good idea shooting the alien. He knew he didn't have a clear shot of the base of its neck to kill it. But he let his anger and his anguish for his sister overtake him. All he got for his trouble was a face full of toxic fumes and one pissed off shape shifter who for some strange reason resisted the urge to break his neck. Not that tossing him off the submarine in the middle of frozen nowhere was much of an alternative. He would still die. Only now it would be a slow and agonizing death.

The toxic fumes which had gushed out from the alien's bullet wound had raced quickly to his lungs making breathing excruciatingly difficult. His left arm ached where it had been nearly disconnected from the shoulder when the alien dragged him by the attached handcuff, then dangled him briefly from the top of the hatch. He deemed himself somewhat lucky that his body was slowly becoming numb from the bitter cold. He had known when he left D.C. that he probably wouldn't survive this journey. He was beginning to wish that he had told Scully where he was headed after all. It would be nice to hear her voice right about now asking her favorite question of, "Are you okay, Mulder?"

She would definitely hate him for this. For not only running off without telling her, but getting himself killed as well. She would, of course understand why he had to do this, but she would still not forgive him. She'd be a few steps behind his father though in the unforgiving department. Behind his now useless orbs he still held a vivid picture of his father's face the last time he saw him. Those cold, spiteful eyes had burned into his soul and made him feel unworthy to even breathe the same air as William Mulder. After all, he had just lost his little sister again. Even though she was a clone and there were others where she had come from, he stupidly managed to lose them all. And this great misbegotten venture was his last chance at salvation.

His heavy parka and several layers of clothing did little to keep him warm. He felt a deep chill clear to the bone though he no longer had the energy to shiver. He felt himself slipping quietly under. He would soon sleep a peaceful slumber from which he would not awaken. He thought of saying a small prayer, but found that along with his eyelids, his lips were now frozen shut. He wouldn't have bothered praying for a miracle to save himself, he only wanted to offer a blessing for those he would leave behind. His heart ached at the thought of his mother after just losing her daughter for a second time, now having to grieve for her lost son. And oh, poor Scully. He hoped she wouldn't take his passing too hard. He hoped she wouldn't waste any more of her life chasing after the impossible in a misguided tribute to her late partner.

God, how he wished that none of this had ever happened; that he had never dragged Scully into his paranoid and chaotic world; that he had never undergone hypnotherapy; that in fact his sister had never been abducted. He wondered if he clicked his heels three times if he could wish himself into a hot Jacuzzi with a bag of sunflower seeds and a Baywatch babe.

"I'm sorry, Mom, Dad... Scully. I love you all." Those final sentiments echoed lazily through his brain. Then all at once, the frigid cold and darkness that had engulfed him, mysteriously abated. There was a surge of warmth that seemed to emanate from the center of his heart outward. A faint circle of light blossomed into a blinding glow. He felt himself rising upwards towards the light.

"Fox," a gentle voiced called out to him. "Fox, can you hear me? Wake up."

Mulder's eyes fluttered open, chasing the white light away, as he focused on the owner of the voice that had awaken him. "Frohike?"

"I look like Frohike to you?" the puffy little face with the five o'clock shadow hovering above him asked.

"You're not?"

"You feel safe with Frohike?"

Mulder eyed the little man with the oddly feminine-sounding voice suspiciously. "As long as we're both fully dressed, I suppose so." He glanced down at himself and was relieved to see that indeed he was fully clothed in gray sweat pants and matching shirt.

"How do you feel?" asked Frohike. "Can you sit up?"

There was a faint sensation that told him he shouldn't be able to rise, but when he tried, there was no problem at all in succeeding. He sat up on the beige, leather couch and swung his sneaker-clad feet to the floor, then stood to better take in the unfamiliar surroundings. He was surprised by Frohike's yuppie-like taste in decor. The living room looked like it had been plucked whole from the showroom of one of the better furniture stores.

"It's quite a place you have here, Frohike. I'm a little shocked though. I never figured you for the 'Better Homes and Garden' type."

"Oh, this isn't my place," said Frohike. "It's yours."

Mulder's first inclination was to laugh, and he managed a good chuckle before something astonishing occurred to him. As he turned his attention to the surrealistic painting of wild horses on the wall above the couch, he came to realize that he recognized the artwork. He even recalled the moment he felt that it would make a nice addition to his home. He shifted his gaze to the Aztec marble coffee table with a bronze statue of a ballet dancer atop it. He had purchased the statue at an estate sale because it had reminded him so much of....

"I don't understand what's happening to me." He looked pleadingly to Frohike. "What the hell's going on?"

"Perhaps you should sit down for a moment. I have something to tell you."

Feeling suddenly boneless, Mulder practically collapsed as he plopped down onto the couch.

"What's the last thing you remember just before you woke up?" asked Frohike.

"I... uh... I remember being cold and in pain. I remember... dying." He whispered the last word, afraid to openly admit it to himself. "Is this heaven?"

"Is this your idea of heaven?" Frohike asked.

Mulder glanced about at the stylish and well-coordinated furnishings and shrugged. "Where are all the Playboy Playmates?"

Frohike smiled lightly and said, "If you were in heaven, you wouldn't even care about such things."

"You're really not Frohike, are you? Look, you said you had something to tell me?"

"Well, it's like this. No, you're not dead. You're not in heaven and I'm not really Frohike. I'm your guardian angel."

"My guardian angel?" Mulder grinned. "You must have really pissed off the big guy to get stuck with me."

"Yeah, well it was either you or..." he shivered at an unpleasant thought. "Let's not even go there."

"So, you're my guardian angel and I'm not dead. What happened? You just plucked me off that iceberg and gave me a home in the suburbs?"

"In a manner of speaking. You remember what you wished for just as you were on your way to becoming an archeological find?"

"I wished that I was in a Jacuzzi with a blonde, big-chested babe."

"Yes, but before that, you wished that--"

"My sister had never been taken."

"It was a dying wish. Not all dying wishes are granted, but sometimes for some people...." Frohike smiled warmly. "You got your wish. You didn't die, Fox because you never made that trip to Alaska. You didn't make that trip because you never became an agent with the FBI. You never joined the FBI because you never had to search for your sister, because she was never abducted."

Mulder wanted to dispute everything the man had told him, but the moment he went to open his mouth, the contradicting words vanished from his mind. The little man was right on all accounts, but something still troubled him. "What about Scully?" he had to ask.

"Who's Scully?"

"Scully's my... my, uh...." Exactly what the heck was a Scully anyway? And why was he even wandering about it? Mulder found himself sitting on his living room sofa, scratching his head and trying to

figure out what he had been mumbling to himself about. Must have been another one of those weird dreams again. He must have fallen asleep after going for his morning run. Admittedly, that was odd for him, but he had been up late last night baby-sitting a suicidal patient.

The ringing phone gave him a jolt and he sucked in a startled gasp before realizing what the sound meant. He stood up, looking absently around for the phone and spotted the cordless handset on the floor near the leather reclining chair across from him. By the time he was able to reach it and switch it on, he heard his own voice answering from the kitchen.

"Hello, this is Dr. Mulder. Sorry I'm not available to take your call. Please leave a message."

"Hey, Fox, it's me," a familiar female voice spoke to his answering machine. "It's too early for you to have gone to the office already so you must be out running those cute little buns off. Anyway, I just wanted to remind you about Mom & Dad's anniversary dinner tomorrow night. If you have a date, bring her, if not, let me know because I have a friend who would just love to meet you. Call me. Bye."

Mulder stared at the flashing red button on the answering machine. He wasn't sure why he hadn't picked up the phone and spoken to his sister. For some reason, her voice had caught him off guard. It must have been that damn, stupid dream. The remnants of it so faint, all that was left was an uneasy sensation that he had forgotten something very important. There was a mild itchiness at the back of his brain that he was forced to ignore when he noticed the time. He had fifteen minutes to shake off the cobwebs, shower and get ready to leave for work.

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January 5, 1995

> The Summit Building <br> Dr. Mulder's Office 2:50 p.m.

"Tell me what to do, Doc." Arnold Matlin pleaded while lying flat on his back and staring up at the ceiling.

"I can't tell you what to do, Arnold. All I can do is make suggestions, but you're going to have to make the final decision on your own. You're the one whose going to have to live with the outcome."

"But I don't know what to do. I don't know how to decide."

"You can start by making a list of the pros and cons of getting married. Think about if you feel ready for a lifetime of commitment, children, in-laws, reduced freedom. Think about having a secured relationship, a friend and partner who will always be there for you."

"Yeah, and sex whenever I want it too," said Arnold rather naively.

Mulder bit down on a chuckle and nodded. "Yeah, well write all those things down, good and bad, and see if the larger amount of good things end up on your 'I do' list." A beeping timer on his watch

sounded and Mulder reached to turn it off. "I'm afraid that's our time for now, Arnold. I'll see you next week?"

Arnold jumped to his feet and shook the hand of his psychologist with a nod of his head. "Sure. See ya, Doc."

As his fifth patient of the day left, Mulder sat down behind his desk to make notes. The buzzer on the phone rang the moment he turned on his portable tape recorder. He switched it off again and answered the call.

"What is it, Libby?"

"Dr. Mulder, you have visitors. They're with the FBI."

"FBI? Send them in."

Mulder had no time to even guess what would bring the FBI to his doorstep. He got to his feet just as the door opened and two people strolled purposefully in. The tall, dark-haired man was about his height and weight and a few years younger. The young woman was very petite, red-headed, and wore a no-nonsense expression on her otherwise lovely face.

While flashing her badge, she introduced herself. "Dr. Mulder, I'm Agent Scully and this is my partner, Agent Krycek. We're with the FBI."

Mulder reached out to shake her hand, and as he grasped it, a vague memory nudged the back of his mind. "Did you say Scully?"

"Yes. Dana Scully."

"You seem familiar to me. Have we met before?"

"No, I don't believe so. I'm sure I would have remembered."

Mulder realized that he had held her hand longer than necessary and with a flash of embarrassment he released it and acknowledged Krycek's presence with a minor nod.

"Please, have a seat." He waited until they accepted his hospitality, seating themselves in the two chairs directly in front of his desk, then he sat down again. "So, what can I do for you?"

Scully presented him with a photograph of a casually dressed, young, black man posing proudly in front of the Washington Monument. "Do you recognize the man in this photograph?"

Mulder took a good look at the picture and nodded. "Yes, this is Darnell Beamer. He's a patient of mine," he added in returning the snapshot.

"We assumed as much. We found your card stuck to his refrigerator and your name penciled in several places on his calendar."

"Is Darnell all right?" Mulder asked with genuine concern.

"We're looking for him. He didn't go in to work today. Would you happen to have any idea where he might be?"

"Why are you looking for him? What's going on?"

"We're investigating a series of murders."

"Murder? You think Darnell's a murderer?"

"It looks that way."

Mulder shook his head in disbelief. "I find that a little hard to swallow. Of course, he's got problems, but murder? I've been treating him for eight months now and I'm sure that I would have picked up on it if he had any murderous tendencies."

"All our evidence points strongly in his direction. We just have to find him now before he leaves behind any more evidence to collect. We need your help to stop him."

"I'm not sure how much I can help you. There is such a thing as patient/doctor confidentiality."

Krycek jumped in, barely restraining his anger. "This guy has been hacking up 13 to 16 year-old girls for the past five months. You can't tell me his rights to privacy are more important than those kids rights to live!"

Mulder looked from Krycek to Scully, seeing the weariness and frustration of not being able to capture the man committing those heinous crimes reflected in her eyes. "I'll tell you what I can," said Mulder.

"When was the last time you saw or spoke to Darnell?"

"That would be yesterday. Wednesday is his normal appointment day."

"Did he seem to be in his normal state of mind?"

"Actually, he seemed a bit more agitated than usual."

"And did you question him about this?"

"Yes, but he wouldn't say much. And the things he did say didn't make very much sense to me."

"What did he say? Maybe we can find a connection to the case."

Mulder was reluctant to give out that information. "I'm afraid I can't divulge any of our conversation."

"Look," Krycek threatened, "we can come back with a court order to search your files and confiscate your records, but that takes time, and time is not something we have in abundance. We believe he's taken another girl. He keeps them for three days before he kills them. This is day three."

Mulder considered this for a moment and came to a conclusion. "I think I may have an idea where he might be. But I'd like to come with you."

"No way," said Krychek. "You just tell us and we'll handle the rest."

"Look, he's MY patient. I may be able to talk to him, to get him to give himself up without a fight."

"Dr. Mulder," Scully cut in, "Darnell is a very dangerous individual. We can't allow a civilian to accompany us on a case of this nature."

"I'm sorry, but I'm still not convinced that you have the right suspect. Now Darnell happens to be a naturally nervous young man," Mulder told her. "He panics easily. I wouldn't want anyone to get hurt because you or your people misinterprets his reactions to a stressful situation."

"Look, we don't have a lot of time to sit around and argue with you!" Krychek belted out.

"No, you don't," said Mulder in a voice that said he would not compromise.

"Then you'd better tell your receptionist to cancel the rest of your appointments," said Scully.

Exasperated, Krychek glared at his partner momentarily, then shook his head accursedly and stormed out of the office.

"We'll meet you outside," said Scully as she took a bit more time in leaving. "We're parked right across the street."

"I don't think your partner likes me any," said Mulder as he escorted her to the door.

"It's been a tough case. He's on edge."

Mulder nodded. "I understand. Well, let me just converse with my receptionist and I'll be with you in just a minute."

After making arrangements with Libby to reschedule his patients, Mulder caught up with the two FBI agents. Krychek was already behind the wheel of the government issue Taurus while Scully sat on the passenger side. She waved Mulder over and he quickly approached and climbed into the back seat behind the female agent.

"Okay, where are we headed?" Krychek asked.

"You know how to get to the airport?" asked Mulder.

"Of course I do."

"Then start driving. I'll let you know when to turn off."

"Why don't you tell us exactly where we're going?" asked Scully. "We could call in for backup and have a unit that's closer go check it out. I don't think we can afford to waste any time."

"I told you, Darnell is a nervous person. I don't want him hurt and I don't want him to hurt anyone else. If your people rush in on him,

I'm afraid that's exactly what might happen."

"If anything happens to that little girl," Krychek threatened, "because of you, I will personally slap the cuffs on you and throw your ass in jail for obstruction of justice."

"I still don't believe you have the right guy."

"Despite the evidence?" asked Scully.

"What evidence?" asked Mulder, leaning forward in his seat to better converse with the young woman in front of him.

Scully twisted slightly in her seat so she was more or less facing Mulder. "We found items in his apartment that belonged to the victims. Hair ribbons and underpants among them. Plus news clippings of all the murders. You still don't think he did it?"

"I... uh.... I don't know what to say to that. If he was going to kill anyone I would imagine it would be someone like your partner there."

"And what the hell is that suppose to mean?" Krychek snapped.

"I thought you said you knew the way to the airport. We should be over in the far right-hand lane."

Krychek swore under his breath and concentrated on moving the car into the appropriate lane. His back seat passenger thankfully kept his mouth shut for several miles. When they approached the airport exit, Mulder informed him to bypass it. They drove silently pass the next exit, then upon reaching the second one, Mulder spoke up again.

"We'll get off here and make a right."

"Where are we going?" Scully asked.

"It's his grandmother's house. She left it to him when she died two years ago. It's not much but it's on a lake and he likes to go fishing there sometimes."

"Skipping work and going fishing on a Thursday? That doesn't seem odd to you?"

"Haven't you ever played hooky from work, Agent Scully?" Catching her straight-laced reflection in the door's rearview mirror, Mulder got his answer. "No, I guess you haven't. We're almost there."

## Chapter 2

As soon as they turned onto the dirt road leading to a small, yellow lakeside house, Scully made a call for backup. When the car came to a stop, Mulder jumped out and raced ahead of the agents, ignoring their warnings to wait and stay back. He ran to the house, finding the door unlocked and rushed inside, calling out Darnell's name. When he found the house devoid of life, he continued on through it and out the backdoor.

It was in the backyard that he found his twenty-four-year-old patient

sitting on a stomp, a knife in one hand and a large, dead carp in the other. Darnell looked up with wide eyes at the sudden appearance of his doctor. He dropped the fish he'd been descaling into a bucket and stood up as Mulder approached.

"Dr. Mulder, what are you doing here?"

"We've got a big problem, Darnell."

"Freeze!" Krycek's voice boomed. "Federal agents! Put down your weapon. Now!"

Mulder glanced over his shoulder and saw both agents with their guns drawn and pointed in his and Darnell's direction. He took two steps closer to Darnell and raised his arms up and out in order to shield him from possible gunfire. His opened trench coat and extra four inches of height helped to make his patient less of a target.

"Dr. Mulder, please step away from the suspect," Scully requested.

"Only if you put your guns away first. You're scaring him."

"He needs to drop his weapon," Scully replied.

Mulder looked at the small steak knife covered in fish scales that Darnell still had clutched in his right hand, amazed that the feds considered it a lethal weapon.

"What's going on, Dr. Mulder? Who are those people? Why are they pointing guns at me?"

"Darnell, it's okay. It's just a big misunderstanding. They're with the FBI and they think you've done something bad. They want to take you in for questioning."

"But I haven't done anything bad. They look like they want to kill me."

"Tell him to put down his weapon," Scully reiterated.

"Darnell, you need to throw down the knife."

Darnell raised the knife and looked at it curiously. "What, they think this is a weapon?"

Mulder heard the unmistakable click of a trigger being cocked and readied for fire. "Darnell, drop the knife! Don't ask questions. Just do it! Now!"

The urgency of the matter finally got through to him and he dropped the knife and raised his hands in the air. Scully came forward, placing her gun in her holster and pulling out a pair of handcuffs. Krycek inched forward and kept the suspect covered while she snapped the cuffs onto his wrists. Mulder stepped out of the way, receiving a death stare from Krycek who reluctantly reholstered his gun. A local police cruiser arrived on the scene just as Scully completed reading Darnell his rights. She held on to her prisoner as she instructed the two uniformed officers and her partner to search the house and grounds for the missing girl.

"What girl?" Darnell asked Mulder as Scully guided him towards the police car. "What is she talking about?"

"They believe you've kidnapped a fourteen-year-old girl and is hiding her somewhere."

"Kidnap a little girl? I would never do a thing like that. Tell her, Doc."

"Look, Darnell, I think it's just a big mistake. But for now you'll just have to go along quietly with them to jail and we'll get this all straightened out later. Okay?"

Scared but totally trusting in his doctor, the young man nodded and allowed Scully to place him into the back seat of the cruiser.

"No sign of her inside the house," said Krycek as he bounded down the four short steps of the front porch.

Scully looked to Mulder. "Would you like to try to persuade him to tell us what he's done with the girl?"

Mulder sighed, shaking his head. "I honestly don't think he has a clue as to what's going on here."

"No, YOU'RE the one without a clue," Krycek growled at him. "You're trying awfully hard to protect him. Maybe you know just as much about all this as he does. Maybe more."

Mulder took a menacing step forward. "Are you accusing me of something?"

"No, he's not," said Scully, stepping forcefully between the two men hoping to slice through the thick layer of testosterone which had settled in the air. "Dr. Mulder, would you just go and wait in the car, please?"

It took an added gentle nudge for him to deflate his chest some and return silently to the back seat of the Taurus. He looked back at Darnell in the squad car and Agent Scully questioning him from the front seat. He saw Darnell shaking his head in a negative motion each time Scully's lips stopped moving. After five minutes, she gave up.

When more police vehicles arrived a few moments later, Scully spoke to a plain clothes detective, apparently leaving him in charge of the area search while she and Krycek took responsibility for the prisoner. When the two agents climbed back into the car, Mulder managed successfully to hold his tongue. He didn't want Krycek to pop a vein while driving, and he could already see the fatigue and frustration in Scully's eyes. They drove in complete silence for fifteen minutes, then he was actually startled when the female agent turned partially in her seat and spoke to him.

"He's not telling us what we need to know. You're his shrink. Surely, he must have told you something. No matter how vague or insignificant it seemed at the time. Please, you have to help us. She may still be alive."

"Maybe... maybe if I could have a few words with him, I might be able to get him to talk."

Scully gave a slight nod of her head, then faced solemnly forward again. As he sat staring idly at the silky, auburn tresses, Mulder wondered to himself if he could have possibly been wrong about Darnell. Had the boy been reaching out for a different kind of help? Had he been secretly pleading with his doctor to help him stop killing young girls? Mulder shut his eyes as the heart wrenching thought tugged at his soul. How could he have so blindly missed the clues of a serial killer?

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When they reached the police station, Krycek took the first stab at interrogating the prisoner. Badgering him with the same repetitive questions, shoving several pieces of evidence in front of his face and threatening him with life behind bars or the gas chamber did nothing to change Darnell's pathetic pleas of innocence. Mulder watched silently alongside Scully through an observation window as Krycek ran through the drill for a fifth time. Darnell was in tears now, swearing on his grandmother's grave that he had done none of the things of which he had been accused.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," said Scully. "You want to go give it a try?"

"I'll see what I can do."

Scully escorted Mulder into the interrogation room, reining Krycek in with a simple jerk of her head. Darnell looked up hopefully when he saw his doctor enter the room. Mulder sat down in the chair opposite Darnell while Scully stood guard at the door.

"Darnell, how are you doing?"

"They think I killed all those girls, Doc. They think I'm some kind of pervert. I don't know how those things got into my apartment. Maybe somebody else left them there. Maybe somebody else wanted me to get in trouble. But you know I'd never hurt no little kid. You know I'd never do a thing like what these say."

Darnell shoved the newspaper clippings towards Mulder and pleaded with his eyes for help. No. He hadn't read him wrong. Darnell was not a child molester or murderer. There had to be another answer. Mulder gingerly pawed through the news clippings, trying to buy a little time until he could figure out what to say to the young man whose life lay precariously in his hands.

"Dr. Mulder?" Scully called to him when it seemed as though he was lost in thought.

"Just a sec." He took a moment longer to finish reading the article which had grabbed his attention, then stood and walked over to Scully. "Would you say that the person who committed this crime here is the same one who committed all the others?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Check the date on this. Darnell, do you remember where you were on

October 13th?"

"I was in Los Angeles."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. My mom's birthday is October 12th, but she was in the hospital having an operation and I went out there for a week to be with her. Remember I told you we kinda thought she wasn't gonna make it, but she did."

"You left on what day and returned when?" asked Mulder.

"I left on that Sunday before her birthday and came back on Saturday."

"That would have been the 9th through the 15th," Mulder pointed out to Scully. "This girl was reported missing Tuesday, the 11th. Her death was estimated to have occurred around ten o'clock Thursday night, the 13th. Darnell called me collect Friday morning from California because he thought his mother was dying. I'm sure if you check the records, you'll find that he has a pretty solid alibi."

"See, I told you I didn't do it."

"No, you didn't, Darnell. Stay right here. Everything's going to be all right."

Mulder ushered Scully out of the interrogation room and back into the observation room for a private chat.

"Look, I'm no great detective, but it seems to me that establishing whether or not a suspect has an alibi would be fairly high up on the list for arresting people. Just how did he become a suspect in the first place? Exactly what led you to him?"

"We had an anonymous tip."

"An anonymous tip?"

"Yes. We get them all the time. The ones that sound like they have potential, we follow up."

"So someone called in and said, 'I know who your killer is, here's his name and address.'"

"Yes. And we checked it out and we found the evidence."

"You must have been getting too close."

"What?"

"To the real killer. He must have felt that you were getting too close, so he decided to throw you off the trail. The guy you want is probably just the opposite of what you have sitting in there. The man you're looking for is probably Caucasian, nearly twice as old, a family man with daughters of his own around the same ages as his victims. He's probably the guy next door, a pillar of the community. All the kids in the neighborhood know him. They wouldn't be afraid to

accept a ride from him and no one would think to question it if they saw him chauffeuring around other people's kids. The fact that he takes the kids on a Tuesday and kills them on Thursday may indicate he's on a strict schedule. Tuesday may be his day to carpool and Thursday is probably his bowling night, the only time the wife lets him have to himself. And whoever this guy is, he knows Darnell well enough to frame him. Now have you come across anyone like that in your investigation so far?"

Scully gave it some thought, then looked at him with a sudden gleam of realization in her eyes. "Stanley Coogan."

"Stanley Coogan? That's Darnell's boss."

"We questioned him yesterday because one of the neighborhood kids thought she saw Tina with him Tuesday afternoon."

"And today you get an anonymous phone call to check out Darnell."

Scully took out her notebook to look up a number, then placed a call on her cell phone. "Hello, Mrs. Coogan? This is Agent Scully with the FBI... Yes we talked to you and your husband earlier. Is he at home, by the way...? When do you expect him...? Well we have a suspect in custody and he's using your husband as an alibi. He claims to go bowling with him on Wednesdays...." Scully eyed Mulder meaningfully as she listened eagerly to Mrs. Coogan's words. "Yes, I see.... Well no, that won't be necessary now. You've been a great help. Thank you."

"Well?" asked Mulder as she hung up.

"Mr. Coogan goes bowling every Thursday night. He comes home from work, has dinner, then it's off to the bowling alley at eight. Usually doesn't make it home till after midnight."

"Where is he now?" asked Mulder.

"On his way home from work."

"Hey, what's going on?" asked Krycek, making a sudden appearance. "I thought you were suppose to be interrogating--"

"He's not our man, Krycek," Scully informed him.

"What?"

"We're going after Stanley Coogan."

"Maybe you should just stake out his house," Mulder suggested. 'Chances are he'll lead you right to her when he leaves to go bowling."

"Way ahead of you, Dr. Mulder."

Mulder stepped aside as Agent Scully went about making a new plan of action. Before leading her task force out to do battle, she instructed a detective to stay with Darnell and take down a detailed accounting of his whereabouts during the times of all the previous murders and to check them out thoroughly. Mulder was sure that all

would pan out in Darnell's favor and decided to hang around until his release was issued.

Three-and-a-half hours later, half the task force returned with Stanley Coogan in tow. Mulder approached Agent Scully when some of the hubbub of the precinct had settled down.

"The girl?" he spoke apprehensively.

"You were right. He led us straight to her. She's been taken to the hospital to be checked out. Other than a few minor cuts and bruises, she appears to be unharmed."

Mulder blew out a deep sigh of relief. "That's great news. Fine work, Agent Scully."

"Couldn't have done it without your help. At least not in time. Needless to say that Darnell is free to go now. They'll be bringing him out soon. I regret that we acted so hastily in arresting him but--"

"You were racing the clock. I explained that to him. He understands but I'm afraid this little incident is still going to set him back a few paces in his therapy."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Maybe you can make it up to him by pulling a few strings and getting someone to drive him home and drop me off back at the office to get my car."

"I'm sure that can be arranged. Just give me a few minutes."

It was another ten minutes before Darnell was finally declared a free man and joined his shrink near the front exit. Mulder was pleasantly surprised to discover who their chauffeur would be.

"What, you couldn't sucker anyone else into it?" asked Mulder.

"I didn't try. Actually, it's the best excuse I have for getting out of paperwork. Krycek's stuck with it now. Let's go."

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When the car pulled to a stop in front of Darnell's apartment building, Mulder took a few moments to walk his patient to the main entrance door and give him a few parting words of encouragement. Scully sat behind the wheel and watched in silent admiration as Dr. Mulder showed the young man brotherly-like affection and concern. When he climbed back into the car next to her, she offered him a raised brow and a quirky smile.

"What?"

Scully started the car in motion as she answered his one word question. "I was just wondering, do you go out of your way for all your patients like this?"

"Not all my patients are arrested for a murder they didn't commit. Of course, if you're asking if I always take such a personal interest in

my patients, I find it almost impossible not to. These people are bringing me their problems. Sometimes, I virtually hold their lives in my hands. I could be the only thing that stands between them and an overdose of pills or a razor at their wrists, or them doing serious harm to others. It's a big responsibility and I take it very seriously."

"From what I've see so far, you're very good at your job."

"Well, it's not just a job anymore, it's an adventure," said the doctor with a big grin.

Scully chuckled lightly then asked, "What did you mean earlier when you said that if Darnell was going to kill anyone, it would be someone like my partner?"

"Hey, I didn't mean to give the impression that Darnell was violent. He's not at all. I guess I was merely imposing my own feelings about your partner. Not that I'm the violent type either, but I don't think it was just this case that was making him seem like an arrogant, bigoted, chauvinistic prick -- excuse my French. You were under just as much pressure as he was, if not more because you were in charge of the whole thing. You WERE in charge, weren't you? Or are you just the bossy type?"

Scully grinned and nodded. "Yes, I was in charge."

"Your partner despises that fact. He doesn't like being bossed around by a woman. He probably tried to seduce you with his good looks and charm when you two first met, but you've worked hard to get where you are and earn the respect of your superiors and coworkers. You weren't about to throw it away for some snot-nose, buy-off-the-rack, brown-noser who believes that more than just a little dab of Brylcreem'll do ya."

Scully was partially in awe and partially amused at the accuracy of his words. "How do you do that?" she asked, having to take her eyes off the road momentarily to view him with amazement.

"How do I do what?" he asked innocently.

"Pinpoint people so accurately? Like what you did with Stanley Coogan. How were you able to give such an accurate profile so instantly?"

"Oh, that. I don't really know. I guess I'm just constantly analyzing people. I often do it without even thinking. Unfortunately, not everyone is as impressed by it as you."

"Well, all I know is that you helped saved a life tonight. I find that pretty damn impressive."

Mulder considered his part in the day's chain of events and its outcome. Smiling shyly, he stated softly, "I'm just glad it all worked out."

It didn't take long before they were pulling to a stop outside the office building in which he worked. Upon saying farewell to Agent Dana Scully, Dr. Mulder felt somewhat regretful. At some point through the hectic day and evening, he had developed a mild

attraction to her and thought that perhaps she felt the same for him. However, the hour was late, their day had been long and the circumstances of their meeting had been far from ideal. He didn't think that asking her for a date now was an appropriate thing to do. He knew where she worked and decided to give her a few days to rest up before contacting her for personal reasons. He climbed out of the car and walked around to the driver's side to bid her good-night.

"Although I would have preferred happier circumstances, it's been a pleasure meeting you, Agent Scully."

"It was a pleasure meeting you too, Dr. Mulder."

Her tired but mesmerizing blue eyes held him transfixed for a moment. The thought of a good-night kiss raced wildly through his mind for a few scant seconds, but he managed to shake the impulse off when the earlier image of her fiercely aiming a gun in his direction came to the forefront.

He swallowed hard and croaked, "Well, good-night."

"Good-night."

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### Chapter 3

January 6

> Summit Building, Ground Floor <br> 1:05 p.m.

As the elevator door opened, Mulder prepared to step out with several others. He smiled when he saw a familiar redhead, standing before the doors, waiting for a chance to board.

"Agent Scully, hello." he greeted her.

"Dr. Mulder, hi. I was just coming to see you."

"Well, I just saved you a boring elevator ride."

With a gentle hand at her elbow, he guided her out of the path of the ebbing crowd. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I just happened to be in the area and I thought I'd stop by to see if you had a few minutes to spare so we could talk."

"Sure. As a matter of fact, I was just about to go to lunch at that sandwich shop right over there. Would you care to join me?"

"All right."

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"So...." Mulder began as they settled down in a cozy booth for two. "Did you want to discuss the Coogan case some more?"

"No, I have some other things on my mind... personal things."

"Oh?" He successfully held back the enthusiasm he felt at having her make the first move. "Personal things, huh?"

"Yes. Ever since we met, I've been considering something."

"Considering what?"

"Well, of course the FBI has its own shrinks. And I had considered going to one of them. But after meeting you and seeing how much you care for your patients, I thought that maybe you might be able to help me with a little problem I've been having."

So she didn't want to ask him out on a date or ravage his body. Mulder put up a brave front to hide the disappointment he felt knowing that she was interested in him only on a professional level. "Oh... so you're interested in a consultation, then?"

"Should I have made an appointment with your receptionist?"

"No, no, this is... this is fine."

A blonde, thirty-something, effeminate waiter came to take their orders. Apparently, Mulder was a regular. "Hey, what's shaking, Doc?"

"Hi, Sammy. What looks good today?"

"You mean besides you and me together?" Sammy cooed with a sly wink.

"I keep telling you, Sammy. Forget about me. I'll only break your heart."

"Don't worry, Doc, you'll have to stand in line to do it. What can I get you? Anything but the tuna salad. Trust me on this."

"All right. I'll have the ham and Swiss combo and a large iced tea."

"And for the lovely lady?" Sammy smiled at Scully.

"Just coffee please."

"I'll bring you the chef's salad. I know you wanna look good for him, but ain't no need in starving yourself to death." A terrified expression crossed Sammy's face as he looked back towards Mulder and apologized. "Sorry, Doc. I didn't...."

"It's okay, Sammy. Don't worry about it."

Sammy felt uncomfortable saying anything else so he just rushed off to fulfill their orders.

"He's quite an interesting character," Scully grinned.

"One of my ex-patients. Actually, he's one of my better success stories."

"I see. What was that last part about? He looked really upset that he

had just said the wrong thing or something."

"Well, it's sort of in reference to my second wife."

"Your second?"

Mulder blushed noticeably. "Yeah. Although I'm fairly good at helping others with their problems, I'm pretty lousy in recognizing and handling my own. So, anyway, what's troubling you, Agent Scully?"

"Oh, I hardly know where to begin really."

"Well, let's try to narrow it down then. Does it have to do with the case you just finished working on? I can see how that would be disturbing."

"No, it's nothing to do with work."

"Bad dreams?"

Scully looked at him in surprise. "How did you know?"

"I didn't. I was only asking. But to be honest, you really don't look like you've been getting enough sleep lately."

Scully frowned. "I didn't realize I looked that bad."

Mulder shook his head apologetically. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I guess I'm just more attuned to seeing stress and depression in others. You look fine. Really."

"You mean except for the depression and stress, right?"

"So, this dream of yours... is it a recurring dream?"

"Yes. I've had it since I was ten. I saw a therapist for a while and they went away for a time. But recently, it's returned with a vengeance. For several months now, I've been having the same dream at least once a week. But lately, it's been nearly every night."

"Why have you waited so long before seeking help?"

"I don't know. I guess I thought I could handle it. After all, it's just a dream, right?"

"Sometimes dreams are the answers to the questions we haven't learned to ask. Sometimes a dream is simply your subconscious trying to weed through emotions you don't have time for during your waking hours. A recurrent dream is one way for your subconscious to alert you to a fact it feels you should be aware of, whether it's an as yet unrealized goal or a lost memory--"

"Lost memory?"

"Sometimes."

Sammy returned with their food, minus the chatter. While Scully sat quietly contemplating, Mulder took the opportunity to attack his sandwich. He was able to take two good bites, a sampling of chips and

a long sip from his tea before his luncheon guest returned from her mental wanderings.

"My sister disappeared when she was twelve," she shyly admitted.

"Kidnapped?" Mulder asked.

"We both were. I was ten at the time. We were in our bedroom asleep one night, and two weeks later, I was found wandering around a mall parking lot still wearing my nightgown. My sister was never heard from again."

"Do you remember what happened to you?"

"No. Nothing. Sometimes I think the dreams I have are memories trying to surface, but they don't really make any sense. All I know is that they really frighten me."

"The kidnappings of these young girls, the case you've been working on for how long now?"

"I was brought into it only two weeks ago."

"When the dreams began to get out of hand?" She gave a positive response with her eyes, and Mulder nodded. "But the murders have been going on for about five months. They've been getting to you subconsciously. Maybe now that the case has been solved, the dreams may start to abate. But you had one last night, didn't you?"

"One of the worst."

"What's your schedule like?"

"My hours are so unpredictable."

"So are mine, but why don't you give Libby a call and tell her when you'd like to come in. You have my number?"

"I believe it's still in my notes somewhere."

Mulder reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a business card. "Here are my home phone, cell phone, beeper and office numbers. If you can't reach me at one of those, that means I'm either in the shower or I'm dead."

"I'd much rather picture you in the shower than dead."

Mulder smiled wickedly. "Please do."

He coaxed a pretty good royal flush from her cheeks with that.

"I'll, uh... I'll just make an appointment with Libby."

"Good. Now," Mulder pointed to her food, "eat up or you'll hurt Sammy's feelings."

Scully returned her new doctor's amicable smile, then eagerly dug into her meal.

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January 10

> Dr. Mulder's Office <br> 3:00 p.m.

"Hi, come on in. Have a seat." Mulder pointed to the couch as he approached from his position behind the desk. "Are you a chocoholic, Agent Scully?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Mulder pulled the cover off a plastic dish that sat on the coffee table and offered her the contents. She looked inside and saw several brownie squares nestled within.

"The three on the left have walnuts, the others are plain. Help yourself. I have lowfat milk in the mini-fridge to go with them."

"No, thank you."

"You're sure? They're really delicious. Libby made them. She had a Girl Scout troop to bake for and she made some extra."

Scully shook her head at the offer and he gave up trying to interest her in them, though he left the lid off the container in case she changed her mind later. Mulder settled in a chair across from her and turned on a small tape recorder that rested on the table near the brownies. He adjusted his glasses for comfort, crossed one leg over the other and prepared to take notes.

"So, tell me, how are you?" he began.

Leaning forward on the couch with her arms on her knees and her hands loosely clasped, Scully smiled lightly and replied, "I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm doing very well, thank you. Now that we have the pleasantries out of the way, how are you?"

"Umm... nervous."

"So am I."

"What do you have to be nervous about?"

"New patients always make me nervous. You come to me looking for help with your problems, and I'm not sure whether or not I CAN help. About all I can do is listen carefully and try my best to offer the right advice. Would that be enough for you?"

Scully gave a careless shrug. "I suppose I don't have a better offer at the moment."

"I'd like to hear about your dream now."

She was somewhat unprepared when he wanted her to jump right in without any prelude. But she quickly managed to gather her thoughts together and begin. "Well, uh... I'm a little girl, and I'm in this

room. It's all white and I'm lying on a metal table. There're some men there wearing scary masks hovering over me. I can't move and I can't talk. Then I hear one of them say, 'Where's the sister?' And someone answers, 'Got her right here.' And I'm able to turn my head in the direction of the voice and I see Melissa also on a table. She looks so pale and her eyes are wide open and she's staring straight up at the ceiling. Then I hear someone say, 'She's dead.' And they throw a sheet over her and I try to scream but I can't. But I keep trying and when I finally do manage to scream, that's when I wake up."

"Is the dream always the same?" asked Mulder.

"Pretty much."

"Do you believe that your sister is still alive?"

"I don't know. She's been pronounced legally dead. Most of her things have been given away. My family gave up the search years ago."

"Have YOU given up the search?"

"No. Actually, that's the main reason I joined the FBI. I figured I could use the resources to try to find her. But, I'm afraid I haven't had any luck so far."

"Does your family know you're still searching for her?"

"I haven't told anyone."

"Why not?"

"Because they'll either want to know what progress I've made or they'll try to talk me out of wasting my time."

"Do you ever feel that your dream is trying to tell you what may have happened to her? After all, you were an eyewitness whether you remember it or not."

"I know. But, how can I know it's real? I need something tangible... something I can hold in my hand or look at and see positive proof that she's no longer walking this earth anymore."

"What if you could remember? What if you could remember every detail about your abduction and hers? Do you think you'd want to remember?"

"Yes, I would."

"What if the memories are far more worse than the dreams?" When she didn't answer the question, Mulder uncrossed his legs, leaned forward in his chair and continued. "I believe I can help bring back the memories. But sometimes the mind forgets things for a very good reason. Could be you're better off NOT remembering. On the other hand, could be your subconscious is holding all the answers to the questions you've been asking. It's not an easy choice to make and I don't want you to even try to make it now. Take your time. I won't rush you to make a decision one way or the other. Okay?"

Scully sighed lightly and nodded. "All right."

"Now, are you SURE you wouldn't like to have a brownie?"

Scully saw that he was attempting to lighten the atmosphere and the smell of chocolate from the opened container had gotten to her. "You said you have milk?"

"Coming right up."

Mulder went to the mini-fridge to retrieve a quart of milk, then pulled down two disposable cups from a nearby wall dispenser. When he returned to his patient, he was pleased to see that she had already selected a chocolate square and held it in her palm, a small bite already taken out of it. He presented her with a cup of milk, then as an afterthought, went to get a couple of paper towels to serve as napkins.

"Thank you," said Scully in accepting the flower-printed paper. "These are really good. Libby's quite a cook."

Mulder settled down with his snack, devouring half in one bite and spoke as delicately as possible with his mouth full. "I love the ones with the nuts."

Scully smiled at him, thinking how much he reminded her of a six-year-old at the moment. This was definitely not what she had expected therapy to be like. Somehow, she didn't believe that he was your average by-the-book psychologist. She wondered just how many would take time out during a session for a milk and brownie break.

"Don't worry," Mulder told her, amazingly in tune with her thoughts. "Your bill won't reflect this little snack time. Would you like another?"

"No, thank you." She still had two more bites left to go with the one in her hand.

"You're not on a diet, are you?" Mulder asked while placing the lid firmly onto the container and stashing it on the floor beneath the coffee table, completely out of sight.

"No, I'm not on a diet, but too many more of these and I WILL be."

A couple minutes later, milk and brownies had been devoured and the discussion resumed. He asked about her family and learned of her two older brothers, both with naval careers and families. She spoke fondly of her mother and sadly of a Navy officer father who had passed away only last year. She had been his favorite, his little Starbuck. Sensing that the topic of her father could very well be a complete session on its own, Mulder carefully guided her away from her reminiscing. This was an introductory session. He wanted to get as much insight into her entire life as possible.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" he asked, jerking her out of her revelry about her father.

There was a definite blushing of her cheeks as she shook her head. "No. No one special."

"Do you date much?"

"No. Not much. My job... well, let's just say I stay pretty busy."

"You enjoy your work?"

"I enjoy the challenges. I like the idea that I can possibly make a difference in the world."

"How are things between you and your partner?"

"Krycek?" She blew out a deep sigh. "I guess you could say that we never quite bonded as partners. I tolerate him and he tolerates me, that's about the size of it."

"I would imagine that partners need to do more than tolerate each other. You're suppose to watch each others' backs, aren't you? He should look out for you and you should look out for him."

Scully smirked. "You mean like Starsky and Hutch?"

"Or Cagney and Lacey."

"Same sex partners. Maybe that's the key. You were right in your assessment of Krycek. He IS a chauvinistic prick. He doesn't appreciate my being his superior, and he thinks he's God's gift to women. If only he knew, a third of the women in the Hoover building thinks he's a jerk, a third thinks he's gay, and the rest.... Well they have fake breasts and bubbles for brains."

Mulder bit his lip to keep from busting out in unbridled laughter. "You don't see a chance of the two of you working out your differences?"

"Not unless Krycek gets a personality transplant. And might I add that he could use some wardrobe tips from you."

Mulder snickered. "I take that as a compliment. You know, when Sears offers its two-for-one sale on suits, not everyone can walk away from it."

"Obviously."

The doctor made a few notes on his tablet before speaking again. "Agent Scully, it seems to me.... Do you prefer I call you Agent Scully or Miss Scully?"

"Well, under the circumstances.... Actually, I'd prefer Dana."

"Dana, it seems to me that there's a lot of stress in your life. There's the stress of trying to find out what happened to your sister and also the stress of losing your father. Your job is a MAJOR stress factor compounded by having to work with an incompatible partner. Your dreams could very well be a culmination of all these stress factors. And I'd rather we work on reducing your stress before attempting anything more drastic."

Scully nodded simply. "All right. How?"

"I'll give you some pamphlets before you leave. There are several relaxation techniques you can try. I don't suppose you can arrange to get a new partner, can you?"

"It's not that simple. Krychek was purposely assigned to me. Actually, I get the feeling that... I don't know. Sometimes I get the feeling that he was sent specifically to undermine me. To make sure I fail in my assignments or at least make it seem like I don't know what I'm doing."

"Why would he want to do that?"

"I don't know. Maybe he just wants to be promoted above me. Or maybe it's not him, maybe it's me. Maybe I'm seeing shadows that aren't there. Maybe he's really a nice guy but I just took an instant dislike to him because I feared my own inadequacies."

"No, I don't think that's it. I've met Krychek, and trust me; he really IS an asshole."

A wide grin etched its way across Scully's features. "It's funny, you know. I've worked side-by-side with Krychek for almost a year now and I have absolutely no trust or faith in him. You, I've known barely a week and...." She couldn't finish the sentence, but then she knew she didn't have to.

"Dana, knowing someone a long time is no guarantee of their trustworthiness. My entire family is a testament to that. My parents have been married for forty years and my dad's on his third mistress. My sister was stalked and beaten half to death by her ex-husband who was also her childhood sweetheart. Now she fears the day he'll be released from prison and come after her again. So you see, knowing someone well doesn't necessarily mean that you can trust them with your life or your heart or your dreams. The mere fact that you give your trust to others does not ensure that you will receive the same in return."

"Sounds like you're telling me that there's no one I can trust."

"No, that's not what I mean. What I'm trying to say is that you just have to trust in yourself. If you meet someone you're not too sure of, and that little warning bell goes off in the back of your mind, listen to it. I'm sure you must have pretty good instincts to be in your line of work, so just go with your instincts."

"So far, my instincts have led me to you. Or is it fate?"

Almost as if in response to her question, Mulder's alarm watch sounded and he quickly switched it off. "Fate is a wondrous thing. It always has such impeccable timing. Same time next week, Dana?"

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Chapter 4

January 17  
> Dr. Mulder's Office <br> 8:40 a.m.

When Mulder got in to work at his normal arrival time, he found the door to his reception area already unlocked. He wasn't too disturbed by this fact because Libby had been known to start her day off a little earlier than usual in order to catch up on her billing or transcripting. When he stepped inside of the waiting room and called out her name, he received no response. He shrugged it off, thinking that she had stepped out to the ladies' room for a moment. Reaching for the handle of his office, he froze when he heard voices coming from inside. He put his ear closer to the door and strained to hear what was being said and by whom. He easily recognized one voice as his own. The second one he came to realize belonged to his newest patient. He was listening to the recorded tape of his session with Dana Scully. Unfortunately, someone else was listening to it too.

Occasionally, he had Libby transcribe some of his sessions so he'd have a hard copy from which he could refer. However, Libby had never taken it upon herself to snoop about in his patients' private records without consent. He pushed opened the door and rushed inside, ready to give his soon to be ex-employee a good chastising. He froze again upon coming face to face with a complete stranger. A blue-suited, dark-haired man old enough to be his father sat comfortably on the far end of the couch, smoking a cigarette. The man eyed Mulder with mild interest, blew out a long funnel of smoke, then pointed to the stereo tape deck nestled on a shelf of the oak bookcase.

"I'd like to get a copy of this tape."

"My father died last year," Dana Scully was saying on the tape.

Mulder switched it off before she could say another word, then turned his attention to the stranger with more gall than manners. "Who the hell are you and how did you get in here?"

Ignoring his question, the man flicked an ash onto the carpet and said, "I've a proposition to make you, Dr. Mulder."

Mulder stood behind a chair adjacent to the couch and studied his uninvited visitor. He was a shady character, that much was for certain. From the steeliness of his eyes and overconfident posture, Mulder sensed that the man possessed a cold, calculating nature and was probably very used to getting what he wanted. He was also apparently beyond the laws of good etiquette.

"This is a non-smoking office," Mulder informed him. "The cigarette will have to go."

The man considered it for a moment, then casually drew one last long drag before dropping the butt to the carpet and stomping it out with his foot.

"On second thought," said Mulder, "the cigarette can stay. YOU get the hell out."

"Soon enough," said the man as a final billow of smoke flowed from his nostrils. He reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a stack of greenbacks which he tossed onto the coffee table in front of him. He said nothing at this point. Only looked to Mulder for his

reaction.

Mulder picked up the money and thumbed through it. The stack consisted of one-thousand dollar bills; at least twenty of them. He placed it back on the table, then sat down. "Okay, you have my attention. What do you want?"

"The tape in that deck and recordings of all future sessions with Agent Dana Scully."

"Why? What is she to you?"

"Agent Scully is the daughter of an old friend. I have only her best interests in mind."

He didn't believe that for an instant. The man was a snake in the grass and definitely up to no good. "Of course, you realize that what you're asking me to do isn't exactly legal or ethical."

The man took out another identical stack of bills and tossed it onto the table with the first. Again he waited silently for the doctor's response. Even if he was desperate for money -- and luckily he wasn't -- Mulder would not betray the confidence of a patient. He still wondered why the words of one petite redhead could be of such a high interest to anyone. It occurred to him that perhaps she didn't remember certain things in her past for a good reason and that the black-lunged devil in front of him wanted to keep it that way.

"If Miss Scully wishes for her private sessions to become public, that's entirely up to her. I suggest that you contact her directly with your request. Now, if you don't mind, I've got a busy day ahead of me."

Mulder stood and walked over to the door, holding it wide open and waiting for the visitor to use it. The man took his own sweet time collecting the money and getting to his feet. Instead of heading straight for the exit, the tall, enigmatic stranger crossed over to Mulder's desk and innocently picked up the framed picture of him and his sister.

"There's a strong family resemblance," said the man, admiring the two happy faces in the photo. "I understand that the ex-husband is up for parole in a few months."

Mulder stared at the man incredulously, wanting to know how he knew about his incarcerated brother-in-law, but too stunned to get his mouth to work so he could ask the question.

"You know, often when a wife abuser and stalker is set free, one of the first things he does is go back and finish what he started. He did attempt to kill your sister, didn't he? Yes, it would be a shame if that parole went through and he got out of prison before he's had the time to fully rehabilitate." He returned the picture to its place on the desk and pulled out a fresh cigarette.

"I suggest you wait till you're outside to light that," said Mulder.

He wanted to say so much more and he knew that the fear and anxiety must have been written clearly on his face. This man had just

threatened his family. It was an indirect threat, but a threat nonetheless. Mulder already saw that the snake had money, but now he was displaying his power; the power to influence a parole board which could conceivably affect the safety of his sibling.

"I strongly suggest that you not mention our little conversation to Miss Scully," said the man as he paused in front of Mulder before leaving. "What she doesn't know won't hurt her." That too, was a thinly veiled threat. "I'm sure we'll meet again, Dr. Mulder," said the lethal-looking older man as he finally made his exit.

Mulder watched him go, then thought quickly. He couldn't just let him walk away without knowing anything about him. Mulder rushed through the reception area and peeked around the corner of the main entrance door, spotting the man as he stepped into a downward bound elevator. Mulder raced to the stairwell and practically flew down the stairs. When he made it to the ground floor, he cracked opened the door and peered out. He had just barely beat the elevator down. The doors slid open but the Smoking Man did not exit. Mulder hit the stairs again and headed for the basement to the parking deck exit.

Barely able to catch his breath, Mulder stopped in front of the door which had a small window insert. Peering through the window, he caught sight of his prey weaving through the parked cars and settling on one to enter. If he were to step out now for a better look at the car, Mulder was sure he'd be spotted. He stayed put until he saw the car in motion. After it pulled out of the parking space and started forward, Mulder dashed out from behind the door and rushed to the hidden safety of a towering pillar. Not only was he able to identify the car and capture the license plate number, but he was also able to ID the driver. He was thoroughly shocked when he caught a quick glimpse of Dana's partner, Agent Krycek in the driver's seat.

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Mulder considered carefully whether or not he should discuss the early morning events with Dana Scully. Although it most definitely concerned her, he could possibly be placing her life in jeopardy. Maybe the guy was part of the Mafia and he wanted to find out if Agent Scully had discovered some illegal dealings he was involved in. He claimed that he was a friend of her father's. Perhaps in being a federal agent, she was torn between doing her job and taking down a family friend. But how did Krycek fit into the puzzle? Had he been assigned to spy on her or sabotage her career in some way as she had speculated earlier?

Nearly ignoring the sandwich that Libby had brought him when she went out for lunch, Mulder sat behind his desk, creating doodles on his note pad with the pen from his desk set. He had come to the conclusion to tell Dana all when she arrived for her appointment at three. She deserved to know that something evil was nipping at her heels and that she had a partner who might be out to do her harm. If she was in danger, she had a much better chance of defending herself if she could see it coming.

As his doodles began to become lighter with each pen stroke, Mulder realized that it was time for a refill. He opened the drawer and pulled out a new replacement cartridge, then unscrewed the top from his pen. As he reached for the used plastic ink holder, his fingers

froze in mid journey. The outside of the pen looked like his, but the inside of it was completely foreign. He stared at the cluster of miniature electrodes solidly fused to the tiny ink-filled tube of the pen. Realization struck quickly as Mulder figured out that his favorite writing instrument had been turned into a listening device.

The Smoking Man must have assumed beforehand that Mulder's services might not be bought. The planted device would have served its owner well. Mulder started to destroy it immediately but gave the situation a little more thought. If Smoky couldn't depend on his bug doing the job for him, he would likely try another method. The thought of him approaching Libby to do his dirty work made Mulder see red. No, he had to play it smart and give the man what he wanted. He left the pen intact and placed it back into its holder on the desk.

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When Scully arrived, Mulder greeted her with a charming smile and a gentle handshake. "Hi, it's good to see you again," he said in meeting her at the door to his office and guiding her to the chair in front of his desk. "How are you?"

"Fine. Except for the usual. I've decided that I want you to hypnotize me. I want to remember what happened when my sister and I were abducted."

Mulder plopped down numbly in the leather chair behind his desk. He hadn't expected the request, and knowing that their conversation was not exactly private, gave him cause for concern. "I thought you were going to take more time to decide. Have you tried the stress reduction techniques?"

"I WANT to remember," Scully reiterated. "You said you could help me."

"All right. But I need to have you read this form first. It describes a few things you need to be aware of before we even attempt hypnotherapy. I want to make sure you're fully aware of the dangers involved." Mulder handed her a clipboard with a sheet of typed paper on it. "Let me know if there are any questions or concerns. Meanwhile, I'll get the tape recorder ready."

Mulder started fiddling with the tape and batteries of his miniature tape recorder, giving Scully the time she needed to carefully read the document in front of her. She looked at him questionably after taking in the first few lines. His eyes implored her to continue reading and she did so silently to herself. Mulder had explained in simple detail that the office was bugged, a man had offered him money for their taped session, and that she should simply follow his lead. He could tell by her expression that she was shocked and somewhat dumbfounded, but she pulled herself together quickly and gave a slight nod of her head in understanding.

When she had completed reading, Mulder drew her attention to his desk. He plucked the pen from its holder in the desk set and carefully unscrewed the top to show her what he had found earlier. After she'd gotten a good look at it, he recapped it, then eyed her purse with a raised, questioning brow. She caught his hidden meaning

and searched her purse for her own pen. Uncapping it, she was relieved to find nothing out of the ordinary.

Mulder nodded, then flipped open his notepad in preparation, using a pencil to take notes. "Well, all set," said Mulder as he switched on the tape recorder and placed it in the center of his desk.

"This uh... hypnotherapy...." Scully began as she placed the clipboard on his desk, minus the warning he had written for her. "There's a lot more to it than I first thought."

"Yes, there is. That's why I want you to take more time to consider it. It's not exactly a proven science and it has been known to do more harm than good. Perhaps you've seen talk shows or heard of instances where people are convinced that their father sexually abused them because their restored memories were either misinterpreted or unintentionally manipulated. I feel that you're still under a lot of stress so I'd rather we concentrate on getting that under control first."

"All right. You're the doctor."

"Let's start by looking at how you spent your week. Tell me about it. Starting with when you left here after your session. How did you feel about it?"

"I felt...."

"Yes?"

"I felt like I wanted to turn around and come right back. I had so much more that I felt I had to say. I hadn't realized that I'd kept so many of my emotions so tightly bottled up."

"Have you told anyone about coming to see me?"

"No. I didn't want anyone to know. I didn't even bother to file it with my insurance company."

"Are you ashamed of having to seek outside help?"

It showed in her eyes that he had struck a cord. "I've always been very independent. I don't like having to depend on someone else for strength. I also don't want it on my record that I'm seeing a shrink. It's been a long, hard struggle to get as far as I have in the bureau. Being a woman, makes it tough. I don't need to have anything hovering over my head that the system might try to use against me when I'm ready to advance my career."

"I understand," the doctor spoke in a reassuring tone. He offered her a tiny smile, then moved on. "So, how have you been sleeping this past week?"

Mulder steered her into safe topics, keeping their conversation from being too intimate or detailed. He would arrange for the pen with the listening device to become damaged in a simple accident later, but for now he didn't want the listeners to know that he was on to them.

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The Rib Shack  
> 7:50 p.m.<font>

In his message to Scully, Mulder had written down the location and time for them to meet later so they could talk freely. The planted listening device had produced within him a fair amount of paranoia. He drove about in circles to make sure no one was following him, then finally arrived at the designated spot ten minutes early. Agent Scully had done him one better and had already grabbed them a table. She was practically salivating over the menu when he approached.

"Hungry?" asked Mulder as he took a seat across from her.

"I wasn't until I came in here. I haven't had barbecued ribs in ages."

"Try the babyback ribs. They nearly melt in your mouth."

"I think I will."

Scully placed an order for a plate of babyback ribs and a side salad while Mulder ordered the special which included both ribs and chicken wings.

"This is a pretty interesting little rib shack," Scully noted aloud.  
"I take it, you come here often?"

"From time to time. Whenever I have a carnivorous hankering for grilled animal flesh smothered in a rich and tangy sauce, accompanied by some of the best little Blues bands the world has yet to discover."

"Blues?"

"Unfortunately, this isn't the right night for it. They have live music bands Thursday through Sunday night. Which is just as well, because otherwise we wouldn't be able to hear ourselves talk."

"Okay, so tell me, the man that paid you a visit, what did he look like?"

"I'm guessing he's in his early sixties, dark haired with a little gray, about six-foot-three and slim. He also appeared to be a pretty heavy smoker."

Scully's brows lifted in interest. "Morleys?" she asked.

"Beg your pardon?"

"The brand of cigarettes he smoked. Did you noticed if they were Morleys?"

"You know this guy, don't you?"

"Not really. I've seen him on occasions. He was in the room when I had my interview for my new position at FBI headquarters."

"You mean to tell me this guy is FBI?"

"I've never known his official title or even his name for that matter. But I've seen him show up at department meetings and sit quietly in the back puffing away despite the 'No Smoking' signs. He seems to be someone of importance and power but no one seems to know anything about him or if they do, they're not willing to admit it. I've even asked my supervisor about him and all he said was that I didn't WANT to know. So I just left it at that."

"Why would he be interested in your therapy sessions?"

"I have no idea," said Scully with a sigh. She leaned forward, crossed her arms and rested them on the table.

"What if...." Mulder had a thought but was reluctant to pursue it.  
"Never mind. It's probably not...."

"What?"

"I was just thinking. He said he was a friend of your father's. Obviously, you don't remember him now but, what if you used to know him; back when you were a kid, back when your sister disappeared?"

"Are you suggesting that he had something to do with my sister's abduction?"

"Possibly. And he knows you don't remember. Perhaps he's concerned that your therapy sessions may cause you to regain your memories of what really happened back then."

"And implicate him?"

"And if you can implicate him, I'm afraid your life would be in danger."

"You believe he'd want to silence me?"

"And anyone else you tell."

Scully was appalled and virtually speechless. "I... I don't know what to say."

"I've been giving it some thought," Mulder continued. "He offered me forty thousand dollars to turn over to him my recorded sessions with you."

Scully's eyes grew wide at the sum her doctor so casually threw out. Mulder waved his hand in a negative motion as if that amount was completely insignificant.

"Don't worry, I didn't accept it. However, he did make some vague threats involving my family, something about pushing through my brother-in-law's parole."

"Your brother-in-law?"

"In prison for stalking and nearly killing my sister."

"Oh yeah, you mentioned that to me before. And our smoking friend said he'd see to it that your brother-in-law gets out on parole if you didn't cooperate?"

"Personally, I'd love the opportunity to get my hands on that worthless piece of shit -- excuse my French -- but I'm afraid he'd go after my sister again the first chance he got."

"Statistically speaking, he probably would. So, I'm guessing it's probably dangerous for you to even be telling me any of this."

"As a matter of fact, I was warned not to."

"Apparently, you didn't take the warning seriously."

"Oh, I took it seriously. That's why I wanted to tell you my plan."

"You have a plan?"

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## Chapter 5

Mulder leaned in a bit closer to Scully as he unfurled his plan. "Listen, they don't know that I've discovered the bug yet. I was thinking that maybe we should just give them what they want. We do a transgression thing where you go back to your childhood and remember something completely harmless. You declare that your nightmares are gone and I declare you another one of my success stories. We allow them to eavesdrop on the sessions in my office--"

"While in the meantime, we meet someplace secretly and have REAL sessions where I recall real memories."

Mulder smiled, impressed that she correctly finished his thoughts. "And if you should remember that black lung bastard as the one who kidnapped you and your sister, maybe we'll have time to find some way of proving it. Is that a plan?"

"Can I ask one question?"

"What?"

"Why didn't you accept his offer to begin with? After all, forty thousand dollars is a lot of money."

Mulder tilted his head slightly and observed her curiously. "You really think so?" he asked innocently.

Scully shook her head, then said, "I just wouldn't want you to risk your family's safety or your own for that matter because of me."

"Do you want to remember what really happened to your sister?" Her eyes spoke for her. Mulder nodded in return, then reached out and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Then I'll help you."

For the first time, as Scully felt her doctor's gracefully long fingers cup her hand, she noticed just how handsome a man he was. At their first meeting, she had been too preoccupied with the case she

had been working on to take notice. If asked to give a description of him back then, she would have stated only the basics of height, weight, skin, hair and eye color. At that time, she had seen him only as a possible source of information. And later when she sought him out for psychological help, all she saw was a capable shrink who possessed a deep affinity for his patients. Now, what she saw as he sat with his face barely a foot away from hers, was a six-foot, slender, dark-haired dreamboat with a faint smile tugging at sensually, full lips and sexy, greenish-brown eyes holding her in a tender gaze.

For the first time since they'd met, Scully saw Dr. Mulder not as a doctor or as part of a case, but as a highly desirable, hot-blooded male. And for an instant she let herself imagine that he was as attracted to her as she was to him. But she allowed the idea to quickly fade. He was merely showing her the same concern she had seen him display earlier with Darnell. He suffered from an unhealthy and unprofessional syndrome of getting too involved with his patients' lives. He probably had a house full of stray cats he'd taken in off the streets as well. He was simply a man with a kind heart and couldn't restrain himself from putting it to good use.

Scully had no idea how long she had sat there watching him watch her, feeling his thumb absently caress the back of her hand. She had even forgotten who had spoken last and what was said. The act of someone setting a plate of salad in front of her brought her out of her trance. It seemed to do the same for the doctor and he sat back in his seat some, his focus switched to the basket of bread rolls and butter pads which had just arrived. For a while, food took center stage. Scully dined on her salad and Mulder pacified his hunger with a buttered roll until the main course showed up.

Normally, Scully would have been too self-conscious to eat a meal as messy as barbecued ribs in any place other than a casual family get-together. But here in front of Dr. Mulder, she had no qualms about picking her food up with her hands and tearing into it unabashedly. In fact, her doctor encouraged her to let loose her inhibitions and not worry about what others thought, including him. At one point, he reached out an index finger and wiped an unbecoming glob of red sauce from the corner of his dinner companion's mouth. He brought the sauced-up finger to his own lips and licked it clean, only afterwards thinking of it as inappropriate behavior. He caught the shocked look on Scully's face.

"I'm sorry," he apologized while blushing noticeably. "I... uh... I was experiencing a bout of *deja vu*."

"Did you use to come here with your wife?"

"The first one, yeah."

"Do I remind you of her?"

"Not at all. Cheryl was the super-model type. She was blonde, buxom, legs that went on forever, absolutely gorgeous...." His voice trailed off in fond remembrance, completely unaware that he'd just made the woman across from him feel closely related to Porky Pig.

At least she knew his type now. She knew she had never stood a chance with him anyway. "What happened with you two?" Scully found herself

asking.

Mulder shrugged carelessly. "Ahh, it was sort of iffy from the start. I was unfortunate enough to fall in love too quickly and marry rather hastily to a woman I had assumed would enjoy bearing my children and living in suburban splendor with me for the rest of her life. She told me when we first met that I wasn't her type, but I insisted that I was. Found out the hard way that she had been right all along."

"And what was her type?" Scully asked.

"Oh, you know, the thrill-seeking, suave, man of the world, lethal weapon type."

"You mean James Bond?"

"Yeah, and my English accent really sucks. We lasted all of eight months before she got bored enough to finally do something about it."

"You think maybe that you were simply blinded by her beauty?"

"That's a possibility. Every time I introduced her to someone, they'd comment on how lucky I was. I guess I was just anxious to settle down and start a family and unconsciously tried to make her fit the mold."

"Well, of course you're not the first to make that kind of mistake," Scully remarked as sort of a lame pep talk. She knew she'd never make much of a counselor.

Mulder was quiet for a moment, letting the iced tea cool the spicy tingling in his mouth. He caught Scully by surprise once again when he stated rather somberly, "You remind me of my second wife." When she looked at him questioningly, he added, "The hair. Same color, nearly the same style."

"Oh." She blushed without knowing why. "Was that another hasty union?"

"No. No, that was a union made in heaven. She passed away two years ago."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. What happened to her?" Scully inquired, then regretted the intrusion instantly. "I'm sorry, that's none of my business."

"No, it's okay. She uh... she suffered from anorexia nervosa. I never realized it until much later. I used to buy her these tight, skimpy little outfits to wear at home for me and I was always telling her how beautiful she looked in them. And I can remember teasing her more than once about getting fat. She asked what would I do if she were to gain fifty pounds or so. I jokingly told her that I'd have to go out and find someone else who could fit into all her leftover sexy clothes." Mulder shook his head sadly. "Definitely not the right thing to say to someone who's deathly self-conscious about their appearance. When she became pregnant, it was more than she could handle. The thought of gaining all that weight.... She stopped eating

altogether. She miscarried in her second month; died of complications brought on by her malnutrition a week later. I tried everything to help her but nothing worked. It was too little too late."

"You blame yourself for her death, don't you?"

"I talked to her mother and found out that Amanda's eating disorder began when she was twelve. By age eighteen, after years of therapy, she had it completely under control. Ten years of eating like a normal person and then I come along and instantly destroy her confidence in herself. I made her feel that I'd only love her as long as she didn't go beyond a size five. Truth be known, I'd always thought she was a bit on the skinny side. I felt she could have used an extra ten pounds at least, but I never told her so. I'm sure she'd be alive today if I had. So, yes, I do blame myself for her death. She just wanted so much to please me."

"Blaming yourself won't bring her back," Scully needlessly informed him.

"No, but it helps to remind me not to be quite so careless of other peoples' emotions. I believe it's made me better at my job. I put my patients' well-being first."

"Is that why you want to help me? It helps to ease your guilt?"

"Does it matter why I want to help you? Isn't it enough that I just do?"

Scully actually felt the sincerity emanating from him and she nodded.  
"Yes, it is. Thank you."

"You're welcome.... By the way, there's just one more thing I should tell you."

Scully frowned, sensing bad news. "What is it?"

"You remember when I said that I thought partners were suppose to watch each others' backs?"

"Yes."

"I think you'd be better off watching your own back. I saw Krycek with the smoker. I imagine he's why old Smoky knows that you're seeing me in the first place. Are you sure you didn't let it slip to Krycek?"

"No. Of course not. If he found out, it's because he went through my purse and sneaked a peek at my appointment book. "

"My guess is that Smoky has probably always been keeping an eye on you from a distance. You know the old saying, 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer?' He wanted to keep you close in case you started to remember what happened all those years ago. Krycek was probably just your basic asshole, but I'll bet you another rib dinner that someone with nicotine breath waved a few grand under his nose and encouraged him to spy on you."

"That little rat bastard," Scully fumed.

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January 22

> Dr. Mulder's House <br> 11:00 a.m.

Scully agreed to meet Mulder at his home on Sunday for her hypnotherapy session. He was on the phone talking another patient through a mild crisis when she arrived. He indicated for her to make herself at home while he took his phone conversation into the kitchen. Scully took off her coat and placed it with her purse on one end of the couch, then sat down and scooped up a recent psychology magazine to peruse while she waited. After ten minutes, the doctor came to the doorway of the living room with the cordless phone still to his ear. He mouthed his apology to her and raised his hand to indicate five more minutes.

"No hurry," Scully whispered back.

He moved slowly back into the dining room towards the kitchen, quietly offering a "Mmh uh," whenever appropriate.

Scully viewed his rear appreciatively. He wore a black turtleneck sweater, jeans and socks with no shoes. She had already thought that he looked especially dashing in a suit, but his casual side was even more alluring. Once he had disappeared around the corner of the kitchen, Scully let out a small sigh. She needed to keep her mind off such things. He was her doctor, a professional. He saw her only as a patient and nothing more.

When another five minutes had come and gone, Scully decided to get up and stretch her legs. She took a stroll around the living room, examining statuettes, wall paintings, vacation memorabilia and framed photographs. The one that caught her attention most of all was a wedding picture of Dr. Mulder and his angelic, auburn-haired bride. She was model-thin, but not so tall. With heels, her head reached just under her groom's chin. They seemed a happy couple, their eternal love for each other radiated in their eyes. Scully felt remorse, not so much for the late Mrs. Mulder who suffered so much in life, but more for the broken-hearted, guilt-ridden widower she had left behind.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," said Mulder as he made a sudden entrance into the room, startling his guest.

Scully jumped slightly at the sound of his voice and turned away from the pictures on the mantle. "No, it's all right. I don't mind."

"One of my patients was having second thoughts about his nuptials. It's not an easy thing telling the pre-wedding jitters from the 'this is really a big mistake,' syndrome, even though I've experienced both."

He pretended to ignore the fact that Scully had been checking out his wedding picture. He had meant to put it away earlier, but the phone call made him forget. He hadn't had many visitors to the house, especially of the attractive, single female variety. He didn't want her to think that he was still mourning over his dead wife. The picture had been there so long that it had become just part of the room, a decorative touch that he took for granted. Luckily, she

didn't make any mention of it, and he wasn't going to give her an opportunity.

"Have you had breakfast yet?" he asked.

"I slept late. I only had time for my morning coffee."

"I have a little brunch set up in the kitchen, if you'd like to join me. It's not much, but I think you need to eat something. A stomach full of caffeine won't be too helpful when I'm trying to put you under."

She didn't argue with him. Her stomach was already growling. She thought she could hold out until after the session when she planned to grab a bite at the mall before she went shopping. She went with him into the sunny kitchen and surveyed the tray of sliced ham, cheese, crackers and fruit wedges. She copied his actions, filling a plate with food, then going over to sit at the breakfast nook in front of the bay window with a charming view of a small, backyard garden.

"This is really a beautiful home you have here, Dr. Mulder," said Scully, enjoying an orange wedge. "Did you decorate it yourself?"

"I'll tell you, I watched this program on PBS once about the mating habits of birds. The Australian bowerbird really stuck in my mind. Do you know how the male bowerbird attracts a mate?"

Scully arched an inquisitive brow and shook her head. She had no idea what the mating habits of the male bowerbird had to do with the question, but it seemed to please her doctor to be able to share his educational TV knowledge with her.

"The male bowerbird, in order to attract the females, has to build a really great looking nest. Every twig has to be the right size and shape and placed in just the right spot. It has to be roomy enough and it has to have the right decorative touches of color and texture before a female bowerbird will even step inside to inspect it. And if it doesn't stand up to her scrutiny, she trashes it and the poor male bird has to start all over again. So, the very next day after watching that program, I went out and hired an interior decorator."

Scully chuckled lightly and said, "Well, you have a very lovely nest, Doctor. I wouldn't dream of trashing it. I mean, if I were a prospective mate," Scully was quick to add, relieved to see her doctor nod understandably.

"My decorator would be delighted to hear that."

For the next ten minutes, the conversation remained light. Once they'd finished eating, Mulder escorted his patient into the study which was like a smaller version of his office. He had her to lie down on the couch and placed a small pillow beneath her head. He got his tape recorder ready and pulled up a chair right in front of her so she wouldn't have to strain her neck to see him.

"You're looking a little nervous," he told her as he sat down with pad and pen.

"I always get a little nervous before I'm hypnotized," Scully smiled weakly.

"Are you sure you still want to go through with this?"

His look of concern and a small voice in the back of her mind made her question her decision once more. After a few seconds of contemplation, her answer was the same. "Yes. I want to remember."

"All right. Let's see how it goes."

Scully fell into the trance easily as the soothing repetitive sounds of her doctor's voice lulled her into a sense of complete relaxation. At his careful prompting, she became a little girl again, roughhousing with her brothers at one point and later sharing Barbie doll fashion tips with her big sister. Her memories were pleasant to begin with until she was asked to recall one special night in particular.

"Daddy was away at sea," she began, still in a calm state of mind. "My brothers were off on a weekend Boy Scout camping trip, leaving the women folk all alone. But we didn't mind. Me, Mom and Melissa had a good time together until...."

"Until what, Dana? Tell me what happened to ruin your good time."

"It... it was late, and Mom had kissed us good-night and turned off the light. She used to leave the bedroom door wide open until I told her that it was a fire hazard. In case of fire in another part of the house, it helps keep out smoke and flames if the door is closed. I learned that at school."

"That's a very smart safety tip," said Mulder. "So the bedroom door was closed and you and your sister were asleep. Was there something that may have awoken you?"

"A light. A very bright light coming through the window. And there is someone in the room. I see him standing over Melissa. I want to call to her and tell her to wake up but... I can't. I can't scream. I can't move."

"The person who is standing over your sister, can you see his face? Can you tell me what he looks like?"

"He's strange-looking. He's little and very skinny. He looks like a ghost. No clothes, all gray with very long arms and legs."

Mulder frowned at the description but prompted for more information. "Can you see his face? Describe his face."

Scully grimaced as the face she'd seen so many years ago came to view in her mind. "His head is so large, like it should be a helmet, but he has a tiny chin and a small straight line for a mouth. His eyes are like giant, cat eyes only they're completely black.... He doesn't look real."

"What is he doing, Dana? Does he hurt your sister?"

"He's pointing something at her and she starts to float in the air. They're taking her out the window."

"They? Is there more than one of them?"

"There must be. Someone is touching my hair, my face... and I want to scream for my mom but I can't. And I look up at the ceiling and it's getting closer... and I want to scream. I just want to scream!"

Hearing the terror building in her voice, Mulder decides that he should bring her out of the trance. He does so gently, easing her mentally away from the past and its horrors and delivering her safely back into the present. He chose not to leave her with full recollection of what she had just experienced. He felt it would be too overwhelming for her to deal with on her own. Instead, he had her to forget all that she had related to him. He would prepare her first, then allow her to hear her own words on tape.

Several minutes later, Dr. Mulder sat in silence and watched for her reaction as Dana Scully listened to her own comments played back on the tape. Her lips were parted with only semi-formed questions poised at the tip of her tongue. She gazed at him in total bewilderment, then suddenly broke out in nervous laughter.

"Wow! Kidnapped by aliens. That's a good one, huh? Guess I need to stop reading those tabloids while I'm waiting in the grocery store checkout line."

"You don't believe that that was an authentic memory you just recovered?"

"Authentic memory?" She looked at him incredulously. "You expect me to believe that I was kidnapped by little green men?"

"No, of course not. You described them as being little GRAY men," Mulder stated with a tiny smile.

"Wait a minute. You're not... you're not actually suggesting that you consider the possibility of my being abducted by aliens as...."

"Possible? There was a time when space travel in itself was considered impossible. Whose to say that a more advanced civilization with higher technology than our own doesn't already exist somewhere among the cosmos?"

"And why with all that advanced technology would they come here and kidnap little girls?"

Mulder shrugged. "I guess every society has its perverts. But if it makes you feel any better, you're not alone. You may be very interested in knowing that I happen to have five other patients who have had very similar experiences. I've formed this 'Close Encounters' discussion group with them where they can get together and share their feelings with others who've been there, who understand what it's like to not be taken seriously by the general public."

"You're feeding their psychosis?"

"Psychosis? What? Are you saying that you don't believe you were abducted?"

"Yes, I know I was abducted, but certainly not by aliens."

"But you heard yourself on the tape. How do you explain what you remembered just now?"

"What I remember was a bad dream. Nothing more. And I can't believe that a man with your education and intelligence would even consider it to be anything more. Those other patients, how could you do that to them? How could you let them believe in something so ludicrous?"

"Look, I understand your skepticism. I was skeptical too when I met the first person in the group. I treated this woman just like you would have expected me to treat her, like she was imagining things or hallucinating. But the more I worked with her, the more I started to doubt my own theories. She passed a polygraph test, and she's taken thorough physical examinations in which the results were inconclusive and somewhat disturbing. Three women and two men from different parts of the country, each with nearly identical stories to tell, each with reoccurring dreams and matching medical anomalies.

"Agent Scully, I'm not talking poorly educated, lonely people looking for some attention and their face on the cover of 'The Globe.' These people would give anything for this not to have happened to them. And trust me, I didn't put the thoughts into their heads. They came to me with their experiences, just looking for someone who wouldn't laugh at them or measure them for a straight jacket. I just want you to know that you don't have to be afraid I won't take you seriously."

Scully shook her head. This was too much. The man was an absolute fruit basket. Without bothering to tell him as much, she got up to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. Thank you for your time, Dr. Mulder. You've been a great help but I don't think it's necessary for us to continue any further."

Mulder was surprised at how fast his apparent ex-patient's little legs could carry her. She was nearly to the front door before he caught up to her. He could feel her tense up when he placed a hand on her arm.

"Wait. Please. Dana, I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable with all this talk about alien abduction. I know it's not an easy thing to accept. And I guess I can't blame you any for thinking that maybe I'm not altogether sane myself. But if there's ever been any other missing time in your life since your childhood that you can't account for, I seriously recommend that you consider getting x-rays taken of your nasal cavities."

Scully dented her brows in confusion. She was actually beginning to become frightened of him. To appease his madness, she merely nodded

and said, "I'll be sure to do that." She then hurried out of the door.

Mulder was tempted to follow her and continue to plead his case, but he had seen the fear and mistrust in her eyes. He had blown it. Undoubtedly now she thought he was a nut. He should have held back. He should have given her the time needed to fully digest her restored memories and come to her own conclusions. He should have kept his mouth shut about his alien abductee patients. She was definitely not ready to hear about them, and that part about x-raying her nasal cavities certainly couldn't have won him any brownie points. He watched from his window as she drove off like a fireman on his way to a three-alarmer. He knew that they were no longer doctor and patient. He had been looking forward to that at one point because he would have felt free to pursue her on a more intimate level. But now, he somehow didn't quite see her swooning over that prospect.

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## Chapter 6

January 27

> Summit Building Parking Deck <br> 8:10 p.m.

It had been a few days since that last memorable chat with Dana Scully. Mulder had attempted to call several times. He left apologetic messages on her answering machine, but never received a reply in return. Trying her cell phone number, he found it to be out of service and attempting to reach her at work, he was told simply that she was away from her desk. He could take a hint. She didn't want to talk to him. He hated for it to end on such a sour note, but he respected her decision and gave up the pursuit.

It was late in the evening, a long day at work ending with his Close Encounters group. Mulder made his way down to the parking deck where only a few cars were still in residence. His own silver-blue Lexus was easy to spot. He clicked the alarm off as he approached it, then nearly jumped out of his skin as a man stepped out suddenly from behind a nearby concrete pillar.

"Holy shit!" Mulder exclaimed as his heart pounded fiercely in his chest.

"Sorry," said the man in a nonchalant tone, "I didn't mean to startle you, Dr. Mulder."

"Then what WERE your intentions and who the hell are you?"

"I'm someone who's been following your work."

"Oh, a shrink groupie. You should see someone about that."

"I have something for you, Dr. Mulder."

Mulder studied the man momentarily. He wore a well tailored suit, stood close to six feet tall, with wavy, graying hair and perhaps sixty years of laugh lines etched into his features. Somehow, Mulder got the impression that this man knew the smoker, but this newcomer didn't appear to be as threatening as the other. Still, when he held

out what he had for him, Mulder was slow to accept it. Only when the man smiled at him with a fatherly charm did Mulder take the index card from his hand.

"What is this?" Mulder asked after reading what was on the card.

"It's a location where you can find answers."

"What are the questions?"

"What may have happened to Agent Scully's sister for one."

"You know what happened to her?"

"I should warn you that you only have about ten hours to get to the location before it's sealed off again."

"I don't understand."

"The building has been undergoing extensive fumigation. The process was completed today, and at six tomorrow morning, the occupants will return and it will be business as usual."

"Why give this to me? Why not give it to Agent Scully?"

"I thought perhaps you might be interested in finding some answers for your Close Encounters group as well."

"What do you know about them?"

"I know you don't have much time to make your flight." From his inside jacket pocket the man pulled out a plane ticket and offered it to the doctor.

Mulder accepted it curiously, then took a look at the time and destination. "You expect me to just drop everything and go dashing off to New Mexico and you won't even tell me who you are or what this is all about?"

"You're wasting time, Dr. Mulder and I'm risking a lot just standing here talking to you. I've given you all I dare for now. You choose for yourself what to do with it." He turned and started to walk away, but remembered one important detail. "Oh, by the way, Dr. Mulder, they can still hear you and Agent Scully. Be careful of what you say and where you are when you say it."

He walked away with brisk, determined steps after that, leaving Mulder with even more unvoiced questions. He glanced at the plane ticket in his hand again, realizing he had only an hour before departure. Not enough time to go home and pack an overnight bag. He felt foolish even considering taking the man up on his clandestine offer. It could be some kind of a trap. But his gut instincts kicked in and he felt that as much as the Smoking Man seemed a dangerous element, the man he had just met was probably a necessary ally.

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Roswell, New Mexico

> Deserted Warehouse<font>

His benefactor must have been very sure of himself when he had approached Mulder back in the office parking lot. Not only had he taken care of the plane reservations, but Mulder also found a reserved rental car waiting for him when he got to New Mexico. He followed the directions on the card the man had given him and about six hours after their meeting, found himself parking in the rear outside of a desolate warehouse miles from any other civilization. He shined a flashlight at the high fence topped with barbed wire that barred his entrance. Scratching his head for a moment, he came up with an idea and reached back into the rental. He pulled out the two front floor mats and carefully threw and positioned them over the barbed wire. With a good deal of effort and concentration, he was able to climb over and clear the fence without so much as snagging a thread of his coat. So far, this cloak and dagger stuff was kind of exciting.

The rear door was locked with a combination keypad. Mulder took out the card which had led him there and punched in the sequence of numbers provided. The door clicked open and he stepped inside. He was faced with a metal stairwell with no place to go but up. The first door he came to led to a long corridor with recessed doors on both sides, about twelve feet apart. He tried the handle on the first few doors but all were locked. They seemed to use a variation of the electronic lock on the rear door which he had entered, but the only combination number he had did not work on any of the doors he tried. They all displayed a bright red button, the only available light other than his flashlight and the exit sign. As he continued down the hall, he noticed that one door's light was green. It opened easily under his touch.

Once again he got the feeling that he was being set up for something. He questioned why he was here, why he listened to a total stranger and rushed to catch a plane without so much as telling anyone where he was headed or why. He still hadn't figured out why he was doing this. Of course, he was curious about what had happened to Agent Scully and her sister, and his patients, but to possibly jeopardize his life and career by breaking and entering may not be the smartest thing he'd ever done. But he was here now so he figured he might as well try to find some answers if indeed there were any to be found.

On the other side of the door was a long corridor housing a monstrous filing system containing wall to wall cabinets of drawers categorized by alphabet. Mulder trotted down towards the end of the corridor and found a drawer with 'Sa-Se' marked on it. He flipped through the file folders inside and came upon two with the last name of Scully. One belonged to Dana and contained nothing more than a few forms which stated her vital statistics and health status. On the first sheet in the folder in bold red letters was the word 'Reject.' Mulder took a look at Melissa's folder and found the same type of documents in it along with a few more concerning some applied tests. Stamped in red on the front of her file was the word 'Terminated.' Mulder wondered if that meant the testing had been terminated or the test subject. He got his answer when he read on and saw the final comment hand-written on the last page in the folder.

He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the wall of cabinets. He didn't really know what he had expected to find, but

this was not it. They had taken a twelve year old girl away from her family, exposed her to God knows what and coldly documented the fact that she had not survived the second round of testing. Mulder drew in a deep breath and shook off the pain and bitterness he felt creeping into his soul. He took a couple of the papers from the folder and stuffed them into his pocket. He moved on, systematically looking for the names of the patients in his Close Encounters group. One by one he located them all, and each were classified as 'Ongoing'.

"Who the hell are these people?" he wondered aloud. Who could have the power -- not to mention the audacity -- to organize such a nefarious campaign; to carelessly manipulate innocent people and treat them as insignificant guinea pigs? He had already begun to speculate, but still found the whole concept so unimaginable. He desperately wished that aliens HAD been the culprit, but all that he'd witnessed so far, reeked of mankind. Before moving on, Mulder took a quick look through the 'M's just in case. He nearly giggled in relief when he saw that the drawer was Mulderless.

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January, 31  
> Washington D.C. <br> 7:33 p.m.

Driving home from the Hoover Building, Scully had become aware of a car following her. She had given the other driver several opportunities to bypass her, but each time she slowed, she could see the vehicle matching her speed. She knew better than to head straight home. She didn't want whoever it was to see where she lived and attempt an attack either once she arrived or later when she least expected it. Of course, she was well armed and competent in self-defense but she was smart enough to avoid becoming a victim. She chose an early exit and pulled into a well-lit and busy gas station on the corner. She parked in front of one of the pumps and hurried into the convenience store. As she suspected, her shadow chose to make a pit stop as well. She casually glanced through the window while pretending to choose from a wide array of snack foods.

The unfamiliar Ford Escort parked in a space furthest from the store in the darkest part of the lot. Scully strained to get a good look at the driver as he exited the vehicle, but it was too dark for a clear view. Then she became sidetracked when a small child -- a towheaded boy no more than four-years-old -- tugged on her hand and asked for help in reaching a package of Popsicles from the freezer. The child's mother was already at the cash register and yelling for her son to hurry up and get what he wanted so they could go. Scully curbed her annoyance at the mother and smiled at the boy as she handed him what he pointed to. The boy trotted back towards the front of the store as Scully turned her attention back towards the window. She gasped in surprise to see a man leaning over and peering into her car, his back to her and the store.

Scully reacted lightning fast. Pulling her gun from its holster, she dashed outside and made her presence known.

"Hold it right there! FBI. Put your hands on top of your head, spread your feet apart and lean forward onto the car."

The tall figure didn't argue. He could see her reflection in the car

window and he knew she meant business. Scully cautiously approached and patted the man down for weapons. Satisfied that he was clean, she backed up slightly and instructed him to turn around slowly. Mulder turned to face her, almost too intimidated to breathe unless she gave the word.

"Dr. Mulder?"

"Am I under arrest?" he asked nervously.

Scully shook her head and blew out a relieved sigh as she put away her gun. "That was you following me?"

He lowered his hands and breathed again. "Yeah, I thought you saw it was me. I was going to pump your gas for you, if you needed it pumped."

"Why were you looking into my car just then?"

"Oh, I noticed your cassette tapes. So, you're a Michael Bolton fan, huh? I don't believe I've actually met one before."

"Why were you following me?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"That's what telephones are for."

"I've been trying to reach you since last Monday. You haven't returned my calls."

"I've been out of town all week on a case. As a matter of fact, I just got back a couple of hours ago. I went straight to the office from the airport. And now I'm on my way home, and I'm very tired, so if you'll excuse me...."

"So you don't need me to pump gas?"

"No, I don't. Thank you." She brushed by him on the way to the driver's side of the car.

"I have something important to tell you."

"Call me tomorrow."

"I believe it's something you'd rather hear face to face. Have you eaten? I noticed there's a pizza place down the road there."

She sighed again. Dammit, she WAS hungry. She knew there wasn't anything at home to cook, not that she even felt like cooking. She had planned on stopping off at a fast food place anyway. She nodded silently in compliance to his suggestion and led the way in her car to the pizzeria two blocks away. Fifteen minutes later, she was sitting across from her ex-doctor in a booth with a large, sausage pizza with extra cheese, between them.

"So you really didn't know it was me?" asked Mulder after finishing off his first slice of pizza. "Not even when I got out of the car?"

"Well I never got a clear look at you from the front and I didn't recognize the car. Where's your Lexus?"

"I swapped with my sister. She had some kind of fancy dinner function to attend and she didn't have time to wash and clean out her car and she didn't want to ride on the back of her date's motorcycle."

"Well, you gave me a little scare there, especially when I saw you leaning over and peering into my car."

"I gave **YOU** a scare?" Mulder snorted. "I'm just thankful I have such excellent bladder control."

He was happy to see her smile for the first time that evening. He hated to spoil her good mood, but he had plenty to tell her. However, before he began, there was one important matter he had to take care of first. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small electronic device that looked like a garage door opener. He purposely chose a moment while she was tearing off another bite of pizza with her teeth. With her mouth occupied, she couldn't ask what he was up to. He put an index finger up to his lips to signify to her to both keep quiet and be patient. She watched silently, with highly arched brows as he pointed the gizmo in her direction. He took a few seconds to check his little gadget, then pointed it to the left side of Scully where she had stashed her coat and purse beside her on the bench. She noticed a dim, flickering green light appear and showed even more interest when the doctor picked up her coat and scanned it with the gadget. Not getting the results he wanted, he pointed to her handbag, and she silently handed it over to him. When he pointed the scanner at the purse, the green light became brighter but still flickered.

'You mind?' Mulder asked before opening the bag.

Scully was more intrigued than bashful about the contents of her purse. She gave him quiet permission to continue. Mulder opened the bag and carefully dumped the contents onto the table. He scanned the items with the electronic device until the green light became steady and bright. He picked up her compact and opened the top. It looked completely normal. Mulder picked up a fingernail file and used the metal tip to pry open the bottom of the case. Pleased with himself, but at the same time disgusted with what he found, he showed Scully the listening device that had been hiding beneath her makeup.

Stunned, then furious, Scully felt like screaming at the top of her lungs just so whoever was listening might end up with a broken eardrum. But she managed to remain calm and scoop her belongings back into her purse. Taking the compact from Mulder, she informed him that she had to go to the ladies' room. She returned one minute later, the anger not quite as evident on her face.

"Looks like I'll have to buy a new compact. I accidentally dropped my old one in the sink while the water was running."

"That's a shame," said Mulder, matter-of-factly.

"That's a neat little gadget you have there," said Scully, eyeing the device as it lay on the table.

"Yeah, it's good for home, office and car. If you'd like to borrow it...."

Scully easily got his meaning and accepted the bug finder with a tired smile. "Thank you."

"I apologize," said Mulder.

"For what? That wasn't your doing."

"No, not that. I was apologizing for frightening you this evening and for upsetting you the last time we spoke."

"You didn't upset me," Scully lied.

"Well, judging by the skid marks you left in my driveway, I thought I had."

Scully blushed with minor embarrassment. "It's just that... I just never met anyone who actually believed in flying saucers and spacemen. And coming from you of all people, it just threw me for a loop."

"You thought I was crazy?"

Scully merely shrugged and shoved another bite of pizza into her mouth to keep from giving a verbal response.

"Everyone has their little peccadilloes, but I believe now that I did indeed jump to conclusions involving not only you but my Close Encounters group as well."

Scully perked up and took notice when he said that. "Are you saying that all of a sudden you don't believe in little green men?"

Mulder downed a big swig of his tea before answering. "I had a visitor the other night. He met me in the garage at my office building when I was getting ready to go home. Much like our smoking friend, he seemed to know a great deal about me and about you. But unlike Smoky, this man seems interested in helping, not harming. He gave me a round trip plane ticket and an index card with a location on it. I ended up at a government operated facility in New Mexico."

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out several sheets of paper folded together. Pushing the pizza slightly to the side, he made some room on the table to open up the small stack of papers and smooth them out in front of Scully.

"I found evidence that indicates that all of the members of my group HAVE been abducted, but not by aliens. These are some forms I found. The place was packed full of these filing cabinets that must have held in the hundreds of thousands of file folders on individuals. People who were experimented on over a period of years without their knowledge."

Scully shook her head and grunted in disbelief. He had apparently jumped from one conclusion right into another. "How could anyone be experimented on for a period of years without their knowledge?"

"I feel that they were probably hypnotized into believing that they had been abducted by aliens. I also conclude that they were given that post-hypnotic suggestion so that if they ever did try to tell someone what had been happening to them, no one would believe them."

"But you believed them," Scully pointed out.

"Which is the reason I think I was specifically chosen."

"Chosen?"

"The man who brought all of this to my attention, told me that he had been following my work. I don't think it's a mere coincidence that those five people found their way to me. The first one I've known for three years. She claims to have been abducted twice since she's been seeing me. One of those times she was missing for a three day period, the second one was for a whole week. I think during her time with her abductors, she must have mentioned my name, or perhaps they had been watching her closely all along. At any rate, and despite the abductions, she was doing quite well mentally under my care. So others were sent to me to look after. Maybe it was the fact that I was feeding into their psychosis, as you put it. I think someone wanted to keep it that way."

Scully wasn't sure how she felt about what he'd just told her. It sounded slightly better than the alien abduction theory but it also sounded extremely paranoid. She inquisitively leafed through the documents he had laid before her. It appeared as though he had merely grabbed a handful of incomplete forms from different areas. She saw a number of dates, the mention of injections with a compound name she didn't recognize along with blood and urine analysis that didn't quite add up.

"I understand what you're saying, but I think you're still jumping to conclusions. To think that our government is conspiring to do secret tests on the general population --"

"Secret government testing has gone on for years using select pockets of minorities, the poor and mental health patients, even American soldiers. Ever hear of the Tuskegee Study, the Philadelphia Experiment, Agent Orange?"

Scully looked at him, unable to argue with him on those counts. "Okay, so someone's doing some testing on unsuspecting people. Obviously, something needs to be done about it. I could run a background check on the facility if you have the name of it for me."

"No, it didn't have a name. I'm not so sure it even has an address. I had been provided with detailed directions of how to get to it, but there was no indication of a road even leading in that direction on the local map."

"Makes it a little hard to check out then," said Scully. "I'm not so sure how we should proceed now."

The fact that she had used the word "we" had not escaped him. He

smiled lightly knowing that she no longer feared him and had basically deemed him her partner in this. He watched her wipe her hands on a napkin and push away the small plate which held the remnants of her second slice of pizza.

"Would you like something else?" he asked. "How about some ice cream for dessert?"

Scully grinned and shook her head. "You know, if I keep hanging around you, I'm going to be as big as a house. Why do you enjoy watching me eat so much?"

She caught him by surprise with that question. With raised brows, he asked, "What... uh, what makes you think I enjoy watching you eat?"

"How many of our little get-togethers so far have involved chewing? You said that I reminded you of your late wife. Is that why you're always trying to feed me?"

Mulder was mute for a moment, taking in her words and carefully processing them. "I uh... I really hadn't noticed. I just...."

When his words faltered miserably, Scully could see that he actually had not been keenly aware of what she considered to be ulterior motives. "I'm sorry," she blurted out, not knowing what else to say for putting her foot in her mouth.

He didn't like having the focus on himself, so Mulder abruptly changed the subject. "I have something else to tell you," he stated in a rather ominous tone.

"What is it?"

Mulder got up and crossed to the other side of the booth so that he could sit close beside her on the cushioned bench. From a different pocket he pulled out two more folded sheets of paper. Before handing them over to her, he paused to explain.

"I came across two more names I recognized in those files. I have a lot more documents at home. I haven't had time to go through them all but from what I could tell, many children were taken, especially young girls. They apparently had to meet certain criteria." He gave her the top sheet of paper and time to study it. "Apparently, you were deemed undersized."

Scully's eyes grew wide and damp as realization began taking root. "And my sister?" she whispered.

"Your sister Melissa was more of what they were looking for. Unfortunately, she uh... she didn't survive the second set of tests."

Scully silently accepted the creased paper which held the answers to her sister's fate. She stared at the words blankly, seeing only the ones that mentioned her sister by name and the date which would end up on her tombstone. She had always known the odds of discovering her sister was already deceased was a good ninety-nine percent probability. Even her family had pronounced her dead and planted a headstone for her in the family plot. But Scully had never given up

completely. She had wanted and needed proof of her non-existence. Now finally, she had what she thought she had wanted all those years.

"I'm very sorry," someone with a deep, velvety voice murmured into her ear.

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## Chapter 7

February, 3

> FBI Headquarters <br> 11:21 a.m.

When Assistant Director Walter Skinner returned to his office after a trip to the men's room, he found an unwelcome stench and its owner claiming the spot behind his desk.

"What the hell do you want?" Skinner growled.

"I've been looking over the report filed by Agent Scully," said the man through a cloud of cigarette smoke. "She's made some pretty outrageous claims here."

Skinner resisted the urge to snatch the file folder away from the Smoking Man and drop-kick his ass out of the office. The bastard was unfortunately his superior and although he hated him with a passion, the A.D. was forced to show him a modicum of respect

"Why should that interest you?" he responded.

"It should interest you as well, that is if you value Agent Scully's life."

"What do you mean by that?"

"There are individuals in high places who would not take kindly to having their pet projects scrutinized or made public."

"Then you're saying that there's some truth to her report?"

"I'm saying that you should do all that you can to dissuade her from investigating the matter further. It would be in her best interest. Trust me."

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Agent Scully had high hopes when her boss summoned her to his office. But upon entering, she grimaced at the lingering odor of cigarette smoke failing to be completely camouflaged by a room deodorizer. She knew that Skinner didn't smoke and she silently guessed who his last visitor had been.

"You wanted to see me sir?"

"Have a seat, Agent Scully." He waited a moment as she sat in a chair across from him, and fingered the opened file folder that lay in front of him on his desk. "I've gone over your report and I find the claims made within to be highly suspect."

"But sir --"

He put a hand up to silence her. "I'm not finished. This Dr. Mulder stands a good chance of facing trespassing and burglary charges. I want you to make him aware of that."

"Yes, sir. But what he's uncovered --"

"Deserves to be investigated thoroughly. And it will be."

Scully relaxed at those words and nearly smiled in relief. "Thank you, sir. Where do we begin?"

"I don't want you involved with the investigation. You're too close to it. I'm placing Agent Krycek in charge for now."

"Agent Krycek? But --"

"Do you have a problem with my decision, Agent Scully?"

Hell yes, she had a problem with it, but she couldn't let him know that. Actually, she was almost certain that he already knew. Why else would he ask? Then she thought of the telltale smoke in the air and realized that her supervisor had been gotten to. With Krycek heading up the investigation, she knew that there would be no investigation.

"No, sir. I don't have a problem. I think Agent Krycek is an excellent choice."

"That's all for now, Agent Scully. I'll keep you apprised of the progress made."

"Thank you, sir."

As she stood to leave, the A.D. left her with a parting line. "And, Agent Scully, I'm very sorry about your sister."

She looked at him, seeing the sternness leave his features to be replaced with soft eyes that spoke of deep regret. For just a moment, she was able to believe in him. She nodded her acceptance of his regards, then turned away and exited the room.

Scully returned to her office, immediately picked up the phone and placed a call. "Hi, Libby," she spoke into the receiver, "this is Dana Scully. I'd like to make an appointment to see Dr. Mulder."

Libby cheerfully asked her to hold, then moments later a male voice came on the line. "Hi, Dana, how are you?"

"Oh, Dr. Mulder. I was just trying to make an appointment with Libby to see you."

"Yeah, she mentioned that. I told her if you called to put you on through."

"Are you with a patient right now?"

"Yes, but he's not exactly the most talkative of people. I think I

can afford to take a little break from our staring contest. You don't mind, do you, Barry?"

His patient was a heavily-tattooed, nineteen-year-old, dressed in torn black clothing with rings and chains inserted and dangling from various body parts. When addressed by his doctor, his only reply was a middle finger held high and a scowl.

"No, he doesn't mind at all," Mulder informed Scully. "So how have you been?"

"I need to talk to you. But not over the phone. When can I come in?"

"Are you free this afternoon? My four o'clock Fear of Commitment group canceled on me again."

"I have nothing else pressing at the moment."

"Good. Look, I'm tired of being cooped up in the office, despite having such gracious company." Mulder threw a casual glance to Barry and was rewarded with another finger salute. "Why don't we meet somewhere? You pick the place."

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National Museum of Art  
> 4:15 p.m.<font>

The place Scully picked didn't serve food, so at least she didn't have to worry about trying to get her thoughts across with her mouth full. When she arrived in the lobby of the museum, she wasn't surprised to find her doctor already there and waiting for her. Actually, he had become so enthralled in a series of African American photographs that he wasn't even aware of her approach.

"They're beautiful," she commented softly, suddenly standing at his side and catching him by surprise.

"Oh, hi. Yeah, I like them too. Especially the one with the little girls jumping rope."

"Double Dutch," said Scully. "When I was that age, I could barely jump ONE rope at a time, much less two."

"Dana, are you saying that white girls can't jump?" Mulder laughed.

Scully rolled her eyes at his joke though she couldn't completely hold back the faintest of smiles.

Mulder turned away from the photographs and placed his full attention on Scully. "So I'm your doctor again, huh?"

"I need someone to talk to and I don't want to have to start all over with someone else."

"I don't want you to either. So tell me, what's wrong?"

"My boss turned the investigation over to Krychek."

Mulder understood the implications immediately but was at a loss for words at the moment. When other patrons approached to view the display they stood in front of, Mulder gently guided his companion out of the way and they began a slow walk down the corridor.

"When he called me to his office to tell me," Scully continued, "I smelled cigarette smoke in the air, but the A.D. doesn't smoke. They're going to pretend to investigate, but they'll make sure that they won't ever find anything. Skinner even wanted me to remind you that you might be facing charges of trespassing and burglary. I hate letting them get away with this, but I'm not sure what to do now. I don't know where else to turn."

"You remember I told you that I had a lot more documents at home? Well, I have some friends... acquaintances really. Actually, one of them is an ex-patient of mine. I won't say which one, but at any rate, they publish an underground newsletter called The Lone Gunman. It has to do with government conspiracies and cover-ups. They act as kind of a watchdog, tracking how the government supposedly REALLY works. Now some of their theories are really OUT there and smacks of paranoia to the tenth power. But these guys are highly educated and well-connected. I gave them the rest of the documents to check out. I gave them a call before coming over. I think they may have something for us."

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It was a fairly small house in a lower, middle-class neighborhood that Mulder drove Scully to. It was furnished in wall-to-wall high-tech electronics and a few chairs. The three men that Mulder introduced her to looked like an absurdly mixed-match trio. The one she considered as normal-looking, with a neat beard and mustache and dressed in a suit and tie was named Byers. His counterparts were Langly, a long-haired hippie of the nineties; and Frohike, a short, older man with bushy brows and lecherous eyes. Scully shook hands with each of the men and offered a pleasant smile in greeting. Frohike held on to her hand and led her to a chair.

"I see no rings on your finger, Miss Scully. Would that indicate that you are quite available for dating and such?" he inquired as she sat.

"Down, Frohike," Mulder warned. "I saw her first. And you know how I feel about sharing."

Frohike reluctantly backed off but not without a final word in the redhead's ear. "If you get tired of those boyish good looks and charm, come check out a REAL man."

Scully could only nod as she bit gently on her bottom lip to keep from spitting out a laugh. She had a pretty good idea now which one had been a patient of Dr. Mulder's.

"So what did you guys find out?" asked Mulder standing near the door while everyone else sat.

Byers, acting as the collective mouthpiece for the group, started the report by pressing a button on his computer. "The first thing we did was run the list of names through the IRS, Social Security, the

National Census and Missing Persons data bases. We found that out of the forty-seven names on the list, twenty-nine of them are confirmed deceased -- through a variety of causes -- and the rest are considered missing, possibly deceased. Now, we've broken it down a bit more and found that all the ones that are still missing are females who were between the ages of twelve and fifteen at the time of their disappearance all between eighteen and twenty years ago."

"It looked like there was some kind of testing going on," said Mulder. "What did you find out about that?"

"The information on the files was sketchy at best, but a few things did stick out. The mention of Smallpox vaccinations kept cropping up and the introduction of an unknown chemical compound. Some of the results of that compound being injected into the bloodstream was listed on several of the documents. But no chemical substance that I know of could have caused those type of results. I've contacted the Thinker about it and he was at a loss as well."

"The Thinker?" Scully asked.

"If ANYONE knows about it outside the government," Langly spoke up, "the Thinker would know."

"So what you've got here," said Frohike, "is the government doing some secret testing with an alien compound."

"Alien as in little green men?" asked Scully.

"Gray," Mulder answered. "Little GRAY men."

"Well, at least alien as in previously unknown to man," said Byers.

"Did you find any common denominator why those particular people were used for testing?" asked Scully.

Byers smiled, pleased that she had asked and proud that he had an answer for her. "Now this is where it gets weird," he began, typing on the computer and bringing up a pie chart. "Forget about male, female, race or age. The ultimate connection is the government itself."

Mulder and Scully drew closer to the computer screen to study the chart as Byers pointed out the significant areas.

"Ninety-five percent of the men and women used as guinea pigs were either in a branch of the military or otherwise employed by the government. A full one-hundred percent of the children were offsprings of military or government employees."

"My father was in the navy," Scully murmured, nearly in a trance.

"Your father was.... I didn't see a Scully listed," said Byers softly.

"It was my sister who was...." Her voice trailed off, unable to complete the thought.

Mulder placed a consoling hand on her shoulder. "Would you like to leave now?" he spoke softly in her ear.

"No. No, I'm all right." She quickly snapped out of her moment of depression and looked to Mulder. "Why use all military and government employees? I don't understand."

"Healthier specimens," Frohike blurted out. "Everyone in the military has to pass a physical, then they have to train to get in top shape and stay that way. And the medical records for government employees is easier to keep up with than those for the public at large. In other words, convenience."

"By the way," Byers grabbed everyone's attention, "We had some of the locals check out the location where you said the files came from. Ever since the break-in, there's been a lot of activity in and out. Military troops have been placed on guard, so we know it's a government operation, but there's no telling who's actually pulling the strings."

"So, we've reached a dead end," said Mulder.

"Only until we figure out how to raid their computer system," Langly spoke. "All the files you had were pretty old. They've probably updated everything digitally by now."

"But you don't even know who they are," Scully pointed out. "How could you possibly hope to get into their computer system?"

Langly snorted. "Hey, I never said it'd be easy."

Byers shook his head and added, "However, the odds are not too great."

"Time frame?" asked Mulder.

The three men each exchanged a querying look, then Frohike chose to answer the question. "Sometime between now and Miss Scully's and my wedding night."

Scully could only look at him as though he'd lost his mind. Mulder took her by the hand and led her protectively towards the door. "Thanks guys. We appreciate all you've done."

"See ya, Doc," Byers and Langly spoke simultaneously.

"Stop by anytime, Doc," said Frohike. "And bring your pretty friend with you," he added with a lewd wink.

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"Your friends are really quite interesting," said Scully as the car pulled away from the Gunmen's lair. "I'm sure I couldn't have possibly gotten that much information that quickly through normal channels at the bureau."

"Yeah, it definitely helps to know a good computer geek or two. So at least now you know a lot more than you did. But how can you put it to good use?"

"I'm not sure. I guess I'll at least have to wait for Krychek's findings. If he comes back empty-handed, then I'll know another cover-up has been issued, and I'll know that my supervisor is a part of it."

"And that old Smoky is right at the top of the totem pole."

Scully sighed deeply as she glared sullenly out the window at passing traffic. "It's all so hard to believe that something so sinister could be going on for so long, all round us, and our own government is at fault. And my hands are tied, and there's not a damn thing I can do."

"Hey, you're not in this alone, okay? We'll think of something. We'll work it out together."

Scully nodded as a warm hand patted hers reassuringly. Suddenly a thought burst into her mind and she exclaimed anxiously, "Your patients!"

"What? What about them?"

"Your Close Encounters group. They're not dead and they haven't disappeared off the face of the earth."

"No, they haven't."

"They could be the key. Have you told them about the files?"

"No. I uh... I'm not quite sure if I should."

"But you HAVE to tell them. Maybe once they realize that they're not being taken by ET's evil brother, they'll remember who's really responsible for their abductions. Maybe they've seen faces, heard names...."

"I understand what you're saying, but... it's not going to be that easy. These people...." Mulder suppressed a nervous laugh and stole quick glances at his passenger as he drove. "I think I may have done too good a job convincing them that they weren't crazy for believing what they did. I think they'd feel a lot less sure of themselves if they knew that Uncle Sam is the true cause of all their problems."

"But you can't let them go on believing in a lie."

"No. I know that. But I'm going to have to approach this very slowly and possibly one at a time. I can't rush this. I'm afraid they may lose their faith and trust in me, and there's absolutely no guarantee that they'll be able to shed any more light on the subject. So... you know... don't expect too much."

Scully could see the worry and even fear in his eyes. This time she attempted to give comfort. She gently patted his arm and spoke softly. "I only expect you to do the best you can."

Mulder allowed the tension to leave his body, then he managed a mild grin. "So, do you want to go somewhere and --"

"No."

"No, what?"

"Oh, well, I thought you were going to ask me if I wanted to go someplace to eat."

"No. I wasn't going to ask that at all."

"I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions then. What were you going to ask me?"

"I wanted to know if you wanted to go somewhere and just watch ME eat. You see, I'm working on a new technique for chewing with my mouth wide open. I hear it's all the latest rage."

"Oh, well in that case," Scully laughed, "definitely, no."

Mulder chuckled a bit too, then once the laughter subsided, he took on a serious tone. "I think you may have been right," he said while keeping his eyes on the road.

"Right about what?"

"About my wanting to feed you all the time. Having meals with my patients isn't really a standard practice of mine. Occasionally when I'm crunched for time or I'm helping to celebrate someone's birthday or something, I might have a quick lunch or a cup of coffee with them. But, you and I... well our first lunch together didn't count because you weren't my patient at the time, and our last dinner doesn't count either because you had already dismissed me as your doctor. But that still leaves the meals in-between... and uh... there's a good chance that I WAS unconsciously trying to make sure that you got enough to eat." He shrugged his shoulders as he glanced over at her. "I don't know. Maybe it's just the hair."

"Do I make you uncomfortable?" Scully asked.

Mulder flashed her a shy smile. "No, not at all. I enjoy your company. Listen... I know you're not Amanda. I'm not still pining over her and I'm not getting the two of you confused. It's okay. Really. So, you see if that was the reason why you don't want to go grab some dinner with me --"

"That isn't the reason," Scully cut him off. "It's my mother's birthday and we've got tickets to Phantom of the Opera."

"Oh. That's a great show. I'm sure you and your mom will have a wonderful evening."

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Mulder dropped Scully off at the museum where they had met so she could pick up her car. She would contact him later when Krycek reported back in, and depending on his findings, they would decide what further steps would be taken. Again, he forced back a strong desire to give her a tender, farewell-for-now kiss. He was seriously beginning to think that it was much more than just the hair. He probably shouldn't have agreed to remain her doctor considering the feelings that she stirred in him since they first met, but he

desperately wanted to be the one to help her with whatever problems she was facing.

After parting from Scully, Mulder used his cellular to call his sister, hoping to score an invitation for a home-cooked meal. She gladly invited him over for dinner but it would have to be on Sunday night because at the moment she was getting dressed to go out for the evening. He knew not to sound too disappointed because she'd put him on hold in an instant and get on the line with one of her unattached girlfriends to arrange a date for him. He loved his sister dearly, but he had vowed to never let her fix him up with a blind date again as long as he lived.

With his looks and charisma, he had no problem at all meeting and enticing beautiful women. But sometimes it just got too tedious to bother because he was looking for one specific woman to fall in love with, not merely to fall in bed with. Since he'd met Dana Scully, the thought of dating other women had taken a back seat. He wasn't sure if anything would ever happen between them, but he wanted to leave himself available, just in case.

He ended up stopping off for Chinese takeout and a couple of videos on his way home. With his schedule, it wasn't very often he had a chance to spend a quiet evening at home relaxing. He walked into the kitchen from the garage and flipped on the light as he pushed the door close with his hip. He immediately froze, sensing something was wrong. He smelled cigarette smoke.

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## Chapter 8

Mulder walked cautiously into the dining room and placed his bags of food and rented videos on the table. He saw a thin cloud of smoke wafting its way towards him, and spotted a tiny, orange glow in a corner of the darkened living room. Mulder stepped to the doorway and reached his hand in to turn on the dimmer switch. Two light sconces on the wall nearest him richly illuminated the room and his uninvited guest seated comfortably in his leather recliner. The place was in total disarray as though someone had been carelessly searching for something.

"What, you don't have a date tonight either?" Mulder asked.

"You've been a busy man, Dr. Mulder," were the mystery man's first words."

"I know there's no sign posted, but I don't allow smoking in my house. And DON'T put it out on my carpet," he warned.

The man took one final drag, then leaned forward and smashed the cigarette butt out on the ballerina statue on the coffee table in front of him. That was it. Mulder decided not to play placid anymore. He started in a threatening manner towards the bastard, but stopped dead in his tracks when he heard a single click from the staircase. He looked up to see the barrel of a gun covered with a silencer, pointed directly at him. A cross between a man and a gorilla was the one doing the pointing.

"As I was saying, Dr. Mulder," said the smoker, to grab the young

doctor's attention again, "you've been a busy little fellow. Where are the documents?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think you do. I want to know who gave you the directions and the entrance codes to the complex."

"I'm still not following," said Mulder, feigning ignorance.

"And of course I want to know who else you've told."

"Look, I've got some Chinese takeout and a couple of movies if you and your friend would like to just kick back for a while."

A second man, looking to be a close relative to the gunman appeared from out of one of the upstairs rooms. "No trace," was his only comment as he descended the stairs.

"Dr. Mulder is being uncooperative," the smoker told his men. "See what you can do about it."

Mulder didn't wait around to see how they planned to carry out that order. He whirled about and made a dash for the kitchen. Before he was able to reach the back door, he felt a pair of iron arms embracing him tightly from behind. They locked around his chest, pinning his arms to his sides and began to squeeze the air from his lungs. The arms lifted him and spun him about to face a huge pair of fists that took turns plowing first into his gut, then into his face. He tasted blood as it dripped from his nose to blend with what was oozing from the split in his lower lip. The barrage of furious fists stopped abruptly just before he was about to pass out from the assault. He was half-walked, half-dragged into the dining room and sat down in a chair at the table. The smell of the Sweet & Sour chicken and egg drop soup in the bag on the table made him nauseous. Somehow he managed to fight back the urge to spew what little he'd eaten that day. An arm was wrapped snugly about his neck and it was all he could do to get a little air through to his lungs.

The smoker came forward and stood at the opposite end of the table. "Are you feeling more cooperative now, Dr. Mulder?"

Mulder looked at the man with tears forming in his eyes. He was ashamed of himself for crying like a schoolboy getting beat up by the school bullies. But he had never been beat up before. He had always been popular in school and his worst confrontation had only been a shoving match which he luckily won. But he hurt now, really hurt, and the tears came automatically.

"Where are the documents?" the man across from him asked once more.

The grip about his neck was loosened in order for him to reply. After a brief bout of coughing and sniffling, he wiped the blood from his lips and responded in a raspy voice. "I... I destroyed them."

"And why would you do that?"

"I was... I was afraid I'd get in trouble if someone found them in my possession."

"Who gave you the directions and the access code?"

"I don't know. Someone left an envelope on my car windshield. The information and a plane ticket were inside."

"You're very impulsive then, Dr. Mulder. Someone leaves you a plane ticket and an address, and you're on your merry way. How did you know that I didn't leave them for you?"

"I don't," said Mulder quickly. "A note promised answers about some of my patients. My curiosity got the better of me." So far, so good, he thought. The asshole seemed to be buying his story.

"Who else have you told?"

Mulder considered how much of the truth he should tell. The man had to have known that Dana Scully knew. He had to have known about the FBI investigation. Hopefully, his knowledge extended no further. "I told Agent Scully about her sister and five of my patients. I was thinking about telling those five patients, but I changed my mind. I think it might be somewhat detrimental to their mental health."

"Who else did you tell, Dr. Mulder?"

"No one. No one else."

Once again, his answer was questioned as the smoker repeated himself. "Who else did you tell, Dr. Mulder?"

"I didn't tell ANYBODY else!" Mulder reiterated, raising his voice.

The smoker lit up another cigarette and blew the smoke purposely in Mulder's direction. His eyes lifted upwards towards the man with his arm about Mulder's neck. He gave the slightest of nods and Mulder felt the iron grip tighten around his Adam's apple. He struggled helplessly to pry the arm away, but it held on, applying even more pressure against his windpipe. He was seconds away from losing consciousness when the pressure suddenly disappeared and air began gushing back into his lungs. The smoke he was forced to inhale did little to ease his coughing. His adversary took pity on him to a degree, blowing his smoke in another direction and requesting a glass of water be given to the doctor.

"You passed on the information to a computer hacker," the smoker stated casually, as Mulder nursed his water. "Several federal computers were breached and information on a number of individuals was downloaded. Would you care to change your story now?"

"Okay. I didn't destroy the documents. I was going to. I had them in my briefcase... which was stolen when I stopped at a red light and some punk came to my window and pointed a gun in my face demanding money. He took the briefcase, thinking that something valuable was in it."

He knew it was the worst lie he'd ever told and he knew it would not be given consideration. His eyes flashed fearfully from the remaining contents in his glass to the man across from him. The man wore an unreadable expression. He wasn't even looking at Mulder, but instead

had found interest in a picture frame on the wall. It was a large frame with a mat of a dozen different shaped cutouts. Each cutout held a separate photograph. The smoker stood and moved closer to view the pictures. They were all family pictures, mostly of Mulder and his sister from babyhood to adulthood. Samantha had put it together and given it to him for his thirtieth birthday.

"I can tell by these pictures that you love your sister very much, Dr. Mulder."

A new fear grew in Mulder's heart. "Damn you, don't you touch her!" he screamed and attempted to lunge himself at his foe. A hand effortlessly pushed him back down in the chair and held him pinned by the shoulder.

"Oh, I won't touch her," the man assured him. "But the boys here...." He gave a nod towards the two gorillas passing as humans. "I understand she's gone out on a date now. We could all go on over there and wait for her to return."

"Please," Mulder begged. "Leave her out of this. She has nothing to do with this."

"Then it's up to you to keep her out. Tell me what I want to know."

He had no other choice. He would not place his sister's life on the line. "You were right. I gave the documents to a computer hacker and I asked him to check out all the people on the list. He said he found out that they are either all dead or gone missing."

"What else?"

Mulder was hesitant, but he knew the man would settle for nothing less than the complete truth. "He said that the people were test subjects. There wasn't enough info to say what kind of testing was performed, but that the majority of the people were servicemen or government employees and their family members. He speculated it was probably because it was easier for the government to keep track of the medical records of its own employees. That's all he found out. I swear that's all."

"Where can we find him?"

"Why, so you can kill him? Look, he's no threat to you. I can tell him to trash the files, to forget the whole thing."

"All right," the smoker responded a bit too quickly. He instructed one of his apes to go get the cordless phone from the living room. When it was placed in his hand, he brought the kitchen phone in and set it before Mulder. "Call him. Ask him to come over. I'd like to meet him and decide for myself if he can be trusted."

"It doesn't work like that."

"No?"

"He would never come straight to my house. I call him and ask for a meeting. If he agrees to meet, he sets the time and place."

"Ask to meet within the hour. Your hands look a bit shaky. Just tell me the number and I'll do the dialing."

Mulder reluctantly called out the seven digits, as the smoker pushed the buttons on the cordless phone. When it started to ring, he gave a nod to Mulder. "No, chit-chat and no codes."

The doctor nodded his understanding, then lifted the receiver to his ear just as the barrel of a gun pressed against his temple in warning. On the third ring, he heard Frohike's voice announcing, "Lone Gunman."

"Hey, Marty, it's me, Dr. Mulder."

"Hey, Doc, what's shaking?"

"I need to arrange a meeting as soon as possible. Say in an hour?"

"No can do, Doc. Pamela Anderson's giving a chat on AOL at nine, complete with GIFs."

"How about afterwards?"

"Sure. Ten-thirty good enough?"

"Yeah. Where?"

"Let's try the bench in front of the Reflecting Pool this time."

"See you then." Mulder hung up the phone, feeling a sick tightness in his chest. He had just betrayed a friend; no matter it was for a good cause. He could only pray that now his sister would be spared from harm. He no longer had much confidence that he would see the light of day himself, and he sorely regretted having to expose the Gunmen to the same fate. The gun had been pulled away from his temple though it continued to point in his direction. He looked to his captor, just barely able to keep the tears at bay. "Now what?"

"Now, we put you to bed."

The smoker gave another nod to his men. The trench coat that Mulder had never had a chance to remove, was pulled down his arms by a set of large, hairy hands, and slipped off to fall in a bunch behind his back on the chair. His suit jacket received the same treatment. He was afraid to ask what they were going to do to him now. He really didn't want to know. He just hoped that it would be swift and rather painless. His tie was loosened and his shirt was ripped open without care. He heard a button as it landed on the floor and spun itself into a corner somewhere. His shirt and tie were removed and tossed on the table, and there the undressing stopped.

He had been staring down at the high gloss of the black lacquer table and at the reflected distorted images of the figures hovering above him. It wasn't until one of the images grabbed his left arm and began wrapping something about it, that he thought to look up. A tourniquet was being fastened about his biceps and that told him one of two things: he was about to donate some blood or he was about to receive an injection. Someone placed a capped hypothermic needle on the table

in front of him. After briefly studying the pale green liquid inside, his eyes lifted to those of the smoker, standing against the wall, a hint of an malevolent smile on his face.

Mulder's entire body trembled in fear as he sat passively awaiting his fate. He gave a fleeting thought to putting up a struggle, but he knew he didn't stand a chance against King Kong and Mighty Joe Young. Begging was a conceivable option, seeing that his pride had left the party some time ago, but the smoker's stark expression gave him no reason to hope for mercy. So he watched as placidly as an unwanted pet being put to sleep, as the point of the needle was shoved into his arm and the contents burned its way into his flesh. He was now a dead man, and those whom he had pulled into this hellhole with him were probably as well.

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## Chapter 9

February, 5

> Dr. Mulder's House <br> 5:46 p.m.

Mulder awoke to find himself sprawled on his bed, dressed in a T-shirt, slacks and still wearing his shoes. He had a killer headache and every muscle in his body screamed in discontent. The call of nature forced him off the bed and into the bathroom. After relieving himself, he faced the mirror and was taken aback by what he saw. Dried blood caked beneath his nose and at both corners of his mouth. His right cheek was slightly swollen and colored a deep purple, matching the hue circling his half closed left eye and the markings around his throat.

"What the hell happened to you?" he asked his reflection, equally surprised by the hoarseness of his voice. He searched his memory for an answer and saw brief flashes of fists repeatedly pounding into him. The images only added to his discomfort, so he pushed back the memories for the present and concentrated on doing something about his aches and pains.

He opened the medicine cabinet and grabbed the infrequently used bottle of aspirin. He rarely got headaches and only used it occasionally after over-exertion on the basketball court or other sports-related injuries. After popping a couple of the pills into his mouth and chasing them with water, Mulder turned on the faucet in the shower and began to undress. Luckily, there was no more blood to be found, but he did find a new set of bruises covering his mid-section. Although he was extremely stiff and sore, nothing felt broken. He stepped into the shower, wishing it was a hot Jacuzzi. A hot Jacuzzi with a Baywatch babe, he thought lazily. Seems like he'd wish for that before. The Jacuzzi, he could manage on his own, but getting Pamela Anderson to join him in it....

He chuckled lightly to himself, wondering if Frohike had gotten the chance to chat with Pamela Anderson on-line last night. Last night. Images were starting to come back to him. Fists hitting, and smoke in his face and tears flowing down his cheeks. He turned off the water and stepped clumsily out of the shower, remembering the fear, the threats, the betrayal. He grabbed a towel drying himself as he went back into the bedroom and reached for where his bedside telephone should have been. Still, half wet, he quickly pulled on some

underwear and jeans, then went to the door. He put his ear to it, listening for signs that he was not alone. When nothing was heard, he cracked the door open and peered outside. No one was in view and no odor of smoke could be detected.

Mulder cautiously worked his way downstairs, stopping off at the hall closet to grab a baseball bat, then searching his home for intruders. He let go a nervous breath he'd been holding in when he had reached the kitchen and found no one else present. His bloodied shirt and tie still lay in a ball on the dining room table near the bag containing the videos he had rented. Detecting a distasteful odor, he picked up the bag of Chinese takeout and checked out one of the cartons. It surprised him that his dinner had gone that rancid overnight. But he didn't dwell on that, instead he reached for the kitchen phone which he saw had been unplugged. As soon as he placed the plug back into the wall jack, the ensuing ring, startled him, causing him to jump slightly and clutch at his heart. His phone line had Caller ID and he felt some anxiety at seeing that the call was coming from the Georgetown Hospital.

"Hello?"

"Where the hell have you been for the past two days?" his father's voice bellowed at him.

"Two days?"

"We've been phoning and phoning, and never got an answer."

"The phone's been out of order," Mulder replied weakly. "Is something wrong, Dad?"

"It's your sister. She's in the Georgetown Hospital Intensive Care Unit. You'd better get down here."

"Dad?" His voice held an unspoken question.

"Just come, son," his father spoke with a deep sigh.

"Now."

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Georgetown Hospital ICU  
> 6:32 p.m.<font>

Mulder walked up quietly behind his father and placed a caring hand on his shoulder. The old man's eyes did not shift from his daughter's prone form as she lay comatose in the intensive care unit. Five gunshot wounds had riddled her body, leaving her with a collapsed lung, an impaired heart and possible brain damage. Mulder had spoken with the doctor about his sister's condition before entering the room, but he still wasn't clear on the details of the attack.

"What happened to her, Dad?" Mulder asked, keeping his voice low.

"That good-for-nothing ex-husband of hers. Can you believe it? They actually let that son-of-a-bitch out of prison. They claimed it was some kind of computer error. An unfortunate mistake. They let him just waltz out a free man, Saturday morning without even notifying

anyone, and what's the first thing he does. He gets a gun and goes after my baby girl."

His father's words were bitter and the anguish in his voice was undeniable. Still, without further prompting, he continued. Mulder listened in silence, his tear-filled eyes never leaving his sister's pale face.

"She had just come home from grocery shopping and he was outside the house waiting for her. She tried to run but he chased her down, firing at her, screaming that he was going to hell and he was taking her with him. He fired five shots into her, two in the chest, one in her left arm, right hip and one in the neck. He saved the last bullet for himself. He'd better be glad he's dead 'cause I would have cut his heart out and shoved it down his throat, so help me."

Mulder knew it was his fault. He had placed his sister's life in jeopardy the first time he had refused the smoker's offer. "I should have warned her," he unintentionally spoke aloud.

"Warn her? How could you--" His father turned to look at his son at last and did a double take, appalled at what he saw. "My God! Look at you! He did this to you, didn't he?"

Mulder wasn't sure who his father was referring to at first so he didn't respond.

"I remember he threatened you too," William Mulder continued, "but I didn't think to check on you. When you didn't answer your phone, I didn't stop to think that he had gone after you too."

It dawned on him then that his father was assuming that he had been attacked by the same person who had attacked Samantha. Mulder shook his head, wanting to explain what had really transpired but not knowing exactly how to go about it.

"Have you seen a doctor yet?"

"No. Dad, I'm okay. Really. Just a little sore is all."

"Your mother's going to be upset with me that I didn't come and check on you."

"Where IS mom?"

"A friend of hers stopped by. I got her to take your mother home so she could get some rest. She hadn't slept since before we got the news."

"How about you, Dad? Don't look like you've slept either."

William shrugged and waved off the question. "You get as old as I am and you don't need that much sleep."

"I'll stay here with Samantha, Dad. Go on home and look after Mom." It seemed as though his father was going to reject the idea, so Mulder gently insisted. "Go home. I'll call if anything changes."

William nodded, gave his son one final pat on the arm, then withdrew

from the room. Mulder took hold of the untethered fingers of his sister's left hand. So much medical equipment was hooked up to her that it was hard to find a safe place to touch her.

"I'm sorry, Sam," he whispered to her. "I'm sorry I did this to you. But promise me you won't die, okay? I'll let you fix me up with one of your girlfriends. I know how much you like to play matchmaker.... Just come back to us, okay?"

He sat down in the only chair in the room and remained alert for any change in rhythm of the attached monitors. After about twenty minutes, a nurse chased him off, telling him he could return in half an hour. He reluctantly departed, then went to sit down in the waiting room where three members of another family huddled together for support. Mulder propped his elbows on his thighs and his still aching head in his palms. Not long afterwards, a hand landed on his shoulder and a female voice called out his name. He thought it might have been one of the nurses at first, but when he looked he found a familiar face brimming with compassion.

"Dana." He was almost able to smile.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped after getting a good look at his face. "What happened to you?"

"Long story. How did you find me?"

"I got a call from Frohike. He said that you had called him Friday night to set up a meeting. He said he got suspicious when he saw that you were calling from home and using your cordless phone to do it. And he said something about you calling him Marty, which is some kind of secret code?"

Mulder managed a brief grin. "Marty is the name he uses to uh... call women with 1-900 numbers."

"Phone sex," said Scully, not at all surprised.

"He prefers to think of it as a kind of inhibitions therapy. When I handed him the documents, I told him it was hot stuff and the owners might come looking for it. He insisted that we have some sort of warning system in effect. Those guys are normally pretty paranoid anyway, so I was hoping they'd take precautions, but I wasn't sure. I was forced to call them and I was afraid that they would get tracked down through the phone number. But you say they're all okay?"

"Yes, they're all fine. He told me that they have abandoned their previous location and that the number you had to reach them before is no longer valid. He tried several times to contact you yesterday and today, but never got an answer."

"All my phones had been turned off or disconnected. I guess they didn't want my sleep to be disturbed."

"Frohike said that you were either taking a massive amount of showers or that.... Well, later, he heard about your sister on the news and figured if you WERE still alive, this is where you'd be."

"They punished me by going after her."

"I don't understand."

"They came to me at my house and demanded to know about the documents and who I turned them over to. If Frohike had gone to meet me, they would have been waiting for him. We'd probably be able to pass for twins by now."

Standing in front of him, Scully, raised his chin with one finger, taking in his injuries with a critical eye. "They really did a number on you. Have you seen a doctor yet?"

"No, I'm all right. But Sam...."

"What's the diagnosis?"

"She's stabilized now, but comatose. They're not sure, but they think she may have suffered some brain damage. Anything from partial paralysis to complete vegetation. They won't know for sure until she wakes up.... IF she wakes up." Mulder shook his head mournfully. "I did this to her. I knew what they were capable of doing and I did nothing to protect her.... I did nothing to protect her."

Scully knew no words that could console him or make him think any differently at the moment. She did the only thing she could think of. She stepped closer and draped her arms about his shoulders, pulling him into the warmth of her bosom. His arms encircled her slim waist automatically, his knees parted further to make room to draw her nearer. As her lips pressed sweetly against his forehead, she felt him tremble and heard the sobs. She squeezed him tighter to convey that she was there for him as long as he needed her.

It took a good five minutes for him to cry himself out. He was glad that his face had been hidden away from onlookers by the folds of Scully's opened overcoat. He found a temporary peace with his head nestled against her soft breasts, moving with the rise and fall of her breaths, and listening to her heartbeat. Under totally different circumstances, he would be in heaven. He finally loosened his grip and she moved to sit down beside him, their hands now keeping contact.

"Thanks. I'm glad you came. Dad sent Mom home and I sent him. I thought I wanted to be alone."

"Have you been here all day?"

"No. I didn't get the call till a couple of hours ago when I woke up. I think I'm missing a day. The last I remember, it was like 8:00, Friday night."

"Are you saying you've been unconscious for over forty hours?"

When he merely shrugged the question off, Scully rummaged through her purse and pulled out a penlight. She held Mulder's head still with one hand and focused the fine beam of light into his retina. He blinked and turned away from it, wincing in pain.

"You're light sensitive. That's not good."

"Just got a bad headache. Probably because I haven't eaten since lunch time Friday."

"I think you should be examined by a doctor. You could have some serious injuries."

"Can I get something to eat first? I'm starving."

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Scully sat quietly in the hospital cafeteria watching her doctor, the man she was beginning to think of as more of a friend, fill the vacancy in his stomach. She had warned him against eating too much too quickly, so he settled for a bowl of chicken noodle soup and some crackers which he ate slowly.

"You know, I'm feeling another bout of *deja vu*," said Mulder, scraping the bottom of his bowl for the last of the noodles.

"When your wife passed away?" Scully asked.

Mulder nodded sadly, bringing the spoon to his mouth, then stopping in mid-travel, suddenly losing his appetite. He lowered the spoon back into the bowl then stared down at the contents.

"My sister brought me down here to eat something because I hadn't eaten in two days. Amanda was in ICU and we were all just sitting around waiting for her to...." He sighed deeply, not caring to finish the sentence. "I didn't know how I was going to make it on my own without her. Didn't know how I would live with the guilt. A friend and colleague of mine spent six weeks talking me through the pain, trying to convince me to let go of the guilt. When I couldn't let go of it, she told me to compromise, to bury it so deep that it would take an emotional earthquake to bring it to surface again." Mulder raised his eyes to meet Dana Scully's. "I'm starting to feel the tremors now," he uttered, his voice growing shaky.

Scully reached her hand out to cover his. "I wish there was something I could do to help," she said, her eyes a bit moist.

Mulder encased her hand with both of his and stated softly, "You're doing it. You're doing it."

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Scully stayed close to Mulder as he was checked out by an emergency room intern. Despite the unattractive bruising and swelling, he was deemed to be in good health with no fractured bones, internal injuries or head trauma. However, the young doctor voiced concerns about the blood work results which left him scratching his head over an unidentifiable compound in Mulder's blood stream. Anxious to get back to his sister, Mulder waved off the concern, joking that perhaps it was remnants of the Japanese blowfish he'd eaten earlier. Too harried to spend any more time on this particular patient, the intern released Mulder from his care, instructing him to have his own physician give him a thorough check up as soon as possible.

As Scully accompanied her shrink back up to intensive care, she considered the doctor's findings carefully. "You said that you were unconscious since Friday night?" she asked on their ride in the elevator.

"As far as I can tell. Why?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Why? There was no sign of head trauma, so that means you weren't knocked unconscious. So why were you out of it for over forty hours?"

"I uh... I don't know."

The elevator doors opened to the desired floor and they stepped out. Scully had planned to go back into the waiting room while Mulder visited with his sister, but he tugged at her arm and urged her to go with him. In passing the nurses' station, he introduced the woman with him as his fiancee since admittance to the ICU was limited. Scully cocked an eyebrow but said nothing. They entered the room quietly, and Mulder timidly approached the bed. He called to his sister softly, then reached out and stroked her hand hoping to get some sort of response.

"She has always been hard to wake up," said Mulder to his companion. "She could sleep through the loudest thunderstorms when she was little. I, on the other hand, would wake up and go running to her bedroom to keep her company so she wouldn't get scared." Mulder threw a soft smile over his shoulder at Scully and she returned it easily. "Even now, she needs two alarm clocks to wake her up in the morning; one she keeps next to the bed and one she keeps on the other side of the room. She really likes her sleep is all. Once she's all rested, she'll wake up."

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Hospital Garage  
> 11:15 p.m.<font>

Mulder had appreciated the company, but he knew that Scully was tired and had a job to go to tomorrow. He wasn't sure at what point he had taken hold of her hand, but he became aware of it as he was walking her to her car. It was exquisitely soft and delicate and her fingers laced through his in a perfect fit. She must have understood that he needed the emotional support holding her hand supplied because she never showed objection to it.

"There was an unknown substance in your bloodstream," she said out of the blue. Obviously, her thoughts weren't on the same plane as his.

"What?"

"Is it possible you were given something, some kind of drug to make you sleep that long?"

A flash of memory hit him and he shivered noticeably.

"What?"

"There was a hypodermic needle on the table. It was filled with some kind of light green liquid. I--I remember thinking when they gave me the shot... I didn't think I was ever going to wake up again."

Scully stopped in her tracks, pulling her hand from his, then turned to face him. "We can't let them get away with this," she spoke adamantly.

"I think they already have."

"But they should be made to pay. These people are nothing more than criminals and they should be brought to justice. What they did to my sister and yours, and your patients and to you... they shouldn't be allowed to continue to destroy peoples' lives like that."

"I agree, but... what can be done if the people in charge of upholding the law are the same ones who are breaking it? They could have killed me if they wanted to but they didn't because they wanted me alive to see what happens when someone crosses them. My sister is up there in a coma because some sick, black-lunged devil wanted to demonstrate his power to me. Well, he's taught me a valuable lesson... several in fact. I've learned that I'm definitely no James Bond. Truth be known, I believe that even Miss Moneypenny could easily kick my ass. I've learned that I don't enjoy having my face smashed in or a gun pressed against my head. I've learned that my family is more important to me than my need to know things better left forgotten. I'm sorry, Dana. If it was just me, I'd do whatever I could to expose these bastards." He shook his head sadly. "But I can't... I refuse to put my family's life in danger again."

He was afraid that she would see him as a pathetic coward, or worse, she'd never want to see him again. He had cast his eyes away from her for a moment while awaiting her response to his declaration. A delicate hand stroked his stubble-covered cheek, careful to avoid the bruised areas. He closed his eyes for a moment at her touch, relief coursing throughout his entire body. When he turned his gaze back to her, a compassionate smile awaited him.

"It's okay. I understand," she said in lowering her hand. "I wouldn't want you to do anything to jeopardize your safety or those around you."

"I usually take it as a come-on when a beautiful woman strokes my face like that," said Mulder changing the tone of the conversation as well as the direction.

"So what do you usually do when a woman comes on to you?"

"Beautiful woman," Mulder corrected her.

"All right. What do you usually do when a beautiful woman comes on to you?"

"Well, after I melt into her eyes, I usually, sort of...." He leaned down and gently pressed his lips to hers. The attempt at romance faltered when he winced in pain at the gentle pressure on his previously damaged lower lip.

"Are you all right?" Scully asked in concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry, I guess I shouldn't try to respond to come-ons so soon after getting my face smashed in." Recalling what he had seen in the mirror, he added, "I'm probably grossing you out, aren't I?"

"A little," Scully replied, then located an unabused spot on his cheek and carefully landed a tender kiss there. She smiled at the surprised look on his face, then took hold of his hand again and silently continued the walk to her car. Once she was safely tucked inside her vehicle, Mulder leaned over and spoke to her through the rolled down window.

"I don't believe I can continue in good faith to be your doctor, Dana. I believe it would be a conflict of interests. I have a colleague I can recommend to you though."

"I don't think that will be necessary. I believe all I need is a good friend whose ear I can bend occasionally."

Mulder smiled. "Just call me Dumbo."

"Try to get some sleep, Dr. Muld--"

"Fox," he corrected her.

"I'll check with you tomorrow, Fox. I hope your sister gets better real soon."

"Thank you, for everything. Good-night, Dana."

Mulder leaned into the car and gave her a simple peck on the cheek to end the evening. He stood back from the car as she eased out of the parking space and threw her a wave as she drove off.

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## Chapter 10

Samantha's ICU Room  
> 9:05 a.m.<font>

Mulder was stirred awake by a petite hand petting his head. He opened his eyes and smiled weakly at his mother.

"Hi, Mom."

"Your dad told me what happened. How do you feel?"

"I'm okay. Really." He stood up slowly from the chair he had fallen asleep in barely an hour ago, and stretched the tightened muscles which had grown sorier than before. "Just a little achy," he told her once he noticed her dubious expression. He was relieved when she turned her attention to his sister.

"Has she waken at all?" she asked, patting her daughter's hair just as she had her son's.

"No. Nothing's changed. The doctor's suppose to stop by soon."

"I remember the last time that animal put her in the hospital. I thought I was going to lose my baby, but she fought back, didn't she?"

Mulder rested an arm about his mother's shoulders as he stood beside her. "Yeah, she fought back beautifully. And she'll do it again. But you know how much Sam likes her sleep."

He was pleased to see his mother smile, knowing how true that statement was. He remained by her side until the doctor arrived. Following a quick examination and a review of her charts, the man had nothing new to offer the family members in the way of hope. It was still a wait and see proposition. Mulder was willing to stay the rest of the day. He had already called Libby early that morning and apprised her of the situation. He knew he would be taking at least a couple of days off, so he had her to either reschedule his appointments or contact the colleagues he normally subbed with and have them take over for him.

His mother, however, acting very much like a mother insisted he go home and get some rest. She wasn't pleased with the way he looked and she was very tempted to find a hospital bed to plant him in. With that threat as a motivator, he kissed his sister's forehead and his mother's cheek, vowing to return later in the evening.

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Mulder was still a bit cautious when he arrived home. The memories of what had happened to him previously were still fresh in his mind. He found everything just as he had left it, or rather the way his visitors had left it. He was tempted to straighten the place up, but realized just how tired he was. The cleaning people would be by tomorrow. He figured he'd let them earn their pay. He poured himself a glass of orange juice, filled a bowl with milk and cereal, then sat down at the breakfast nook to eat. Just as he was about to consume the first spoonful of Captain Crunch, the chiming of the doorbell startled him so badly he dropped the spoon to the floor. The bad guys probably would have just broken in, not bothering with the civilities of ringing a doorbell. Mulder calmed himself with a couple of deep breaths, then went into the living room and peered through the peephole. He unlocked the door and quickly ushered his guest inside.

"Frohike? What are you doing here? I don't think it's safe for you to be here."

"I'm not Frohike," the person with Frohike's face replied. "I'm the other one. Remember, your guardian angel? The one who brought you here?"

At first the little man's words made no sense, then all at once, a new set of memories flooded Mulder's brain. The memories of a whole other life crammed themselves in right next to his present life.

"Yeah... I remember you now. But you could get in trouble looking like that now."

"Oh, well I can change my appearance to look like anyone you want me to. How about this?" Frohike's image changed from a stout, little pug-faced man in a rumpled suit, to a very buxom blonde in a bright orange bathing suit, who bore a remarkable resemblance to a certain Baywatch babe.

Mulder gasped at the voluptuous sight. "Whoa! Why didn't you do that earlier?"

"I didn't want your attention to stray."

Mulder stared unabashed at the huge swell of breasts that were barely being contained by the bathing suit. "Well, those are a bit distracting."

"That's what I thought." Frohike's image returned to its original form. "This look will do just fine. I won't be here long. I have something important to tell you, but I think you'd better sit down first." Frohike pointed towards the couch and Mulder led the way.

"The last time you told me I'd better sit down, I ended up with a whole new life." He looked at the little man and saw an uneasy expression on his face. Mulder suddenly felt queasy. He sat down and prepared himself for some unpleasant news. "What is it?"

"Well, you see, it's like this.... Have you ever seen the movie, 'Here Comes Mr. Jordan?' or the remake, 'Heaven Can Wait?' It starred Warren Beatty."

"Oh yeah. I saw the one with Warren Beatty."

"Do you remember the story?"

"Yeah. Warren Beatty's character had died, but he was returned to earth and was given a new body to use because his old one had already been destroyed by the time the angels found out that they had made a mistake in taking him in the first place."

"Yes, and the mistake that had been made was that someone ASSUMED that he was going to die because of the circumstances he was facing at the time, when in fact, he would have survived all along. However, his soul was plucked from his body before he was completely dead and things just got a bit out of hand from there."

Mulder spent a moment taking that all in. "So are you saying that... that when I was laying out there in the snow and ice DYING... that I really was going to live?"

Frohike nodded. "Well, you have to admit, things weren't exactly in your favor. You were roughed up by an alien, exposed to his blood which is a deadly toxin, the temperature is forty below and you're miles away from help. So naturally I thought... you know, I'd save you a few minutes of unnecessary suffering."

"And then later you found out that--"

"I acted in haste. It appears that the cold weather was actually a PLUS and not a minus that should have been calculated into your final outcome."

"So bringing me here, creating this new life for me was also a mistake?"

"It was more like a boo-boo."

"A boo-boo?"

"Apparently, your previous life wasn't really over. So, the dying wish that you made is, for all purposes, null and void."

"Null and void?" Mulder yelled, getting to his feet and standing menacingly over Frohike. "Just like that? I've got my sister back! I have fond childhood memories of us growing up together. I've got parents who never divorced, a mother who doesn't have to take anti-depressants and a father who gives me a pat on the back once in a while. Dammit, I have a real family here!"

"Fox... about your family... THIS family...." Frohike was reluctant to continue. By the tone of his voice Mulder could tell that he was hoarding bad news.

"What ABOUT my family?"

"I really shouldn't be telling you this--"

"But you will," said Mulder, making it a demand more than a suggestion.

"Fox, your sister... I'm afraid she's not going to recover. Her condition is permanent. The decision of whether or not to allow her to die is going to tear your whole family apart."

"You... you can do something about it, can't you? You said you're a guardian angel."

"I'm YOUR guardian angel. I watch out for YOU, not those around you."

"Well, where the hell's Samantha's guardian angel? Has he been sleeping on the job or something?"

"It's complicated, Fox--"

"Don't call me that!" Mulder shouted. "Why would you give this to me? Give me what I've wanted ever since I was twelve and then just snatch it right back?"

"I'm sorry. Each life has its own destiny. If your sister had never been abducted when she was a child, this would have been her destiny. And by the same token, if you never became an FBI agent, trying to find her, you would never have become Dana Scully's partner. You two make a pretty good team. Not like her and Krycek."

An uneasy feeling crept into his gut at the thought of Scully having a partner she could not depend on or trust. "What happens to Scully?" he asked, already fearing the reply.

"Dana is going to continue her investigation into what happened to her sister and your missing patients."

"Missing patients? What missing patients?"

"Your Close Encounters group. Within the next week, they will each disappear without a trace. Agent Scully will go against orders and

investigate. Her search is going to lead her into a direction that she shouldn't travel alone. Since she doesn't have a partner like you, one who would risk his own life to protect her...." Frohike sighed hopelessly before going on. "It will be made to look like a suicide."

Mulder shook his head pathetically and dropped down onto the couch, closing his eyes in despair. "You guys don't play fair," he spoke, nearly in tears.

"I know it sucks. It's like that saying, 'The grass is always greener on the other side,' until you get on the other side and see that it's mostly just weeds." Frohike sat beside him and patted him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, Fox. I screwed up big time. And now I'm here to try to put things right. You'll have your old life back. But if it helps any, you WILL find your sister someday. I can't tell you how or when, but she is alive and well and will be for a very long time. Also, your partner, although she will experience some trying times, she will also see many years yet to come, but only if you're there for her. She will need you desperately."

The words had calmed him. Knowing that his search would pay off someday, and knowing that Scully needed him was enough to lure him quietly back into his previous existence. Mulder looked at Frohike with a meek smile.

"Will I be seeing you again?"

"Not anytime soon."

"Will I remember like I remember now?"

"You'll remember only what you need to. Are you ready?"

Mulder took a moment to glance around at his home, already sensing an unfamiliarity at the surroundings. No, he wouldn't miss it. He looked to Frohike again and nodded. "I'm ready. Hey, wait! You're not going to stick me back out in the snow, are you?"

"No. You'll be in a military hospital. It will be a week later than when this all began."

"Oh. Okay."

"Lie down now and close your eyes."

Mulder did as he was told, then instantly felt a chill race through his body. He felt suddenly exhausted and weak with a dull aching in his bones. Then he felt one other thing, a gently squeezing warmth on his left arm. Small hands grasped him delicately and he knew instinctively who they belonged to. As he opened his eyes and focused on a window to his right, the memories of the trek in the snow and the alien aboard the submarine out in the middle of nowhere, assaulted his brain. He knew that somehow, Scully had managed to find him. Somehow she had saved his life.

"I'm alive," he tried to say, but his throat was dry and his mouth seemed to be milling its own cotton. What actually came out was nothing more than a grunt, but it was enough to draw attention to the fact that he was now awake.

Sitting patiently at his bedside with her head down, Scully perked up instantly at the sound she had heard. It was the first sign of consciousness her partner had made all week. She smiled when she saw that his eyes were open and his mouth trying to work. "Hey! How ya feeling?"

Her voice was overly cheerful, Mulder thought. But it was a beautiful sound nonetheless. He had expected her to be angry at him. She had every right to be angry. But when he turned his head to face her, he met with a huge grin that stretched for miles. Her eyes were large balls of sunshine beaming at him and she looked as though she wanted to scoop him up in her arms and hug him and pet him and squeeze him.

Mulder's voice was raspy from none use and whatever tubes had been previously stuck down his throat. He could only manage a whisper when answering her question. "Like I got a ba-a-ad case of freezer burn.... How did I get here?"

"A Naval reconnaissance squad found you and choppered you to Eisenhower Field.... Thanks for ditching me."

Ouch. He knew that was coming. "I'm sorry," he apologized softly. "I couldn't let you risk your life on this."

Idiot, she thought to herself. Big, sweet, stupid idiot. "Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked.

His eyes closed as the memory of the alien on the submarine looming over him returned. "She's alive," it told him, speaking of his sister. "Can you die now?"

"No," Mulder said, opening his eyes again and focusing on Scully. "No, but I--I found something I thought I'd lost..."

"You WILL find your sister someday," an unfamiliar but very friendly voice echoed believably in his mind. Listening to the voice, he'd nearly forgotten that Scully was sitting beside him, practically on the edge of her seat waiting for him to continue. He came out of himself long enough to complete his statement.

"...faith to keep looking."

That was all he could manage for now. Sleep was calling to him and he was finding it impossible to ignore. As he drifted off, he felt a warmth stroke his temple and his lips curled into a smile. Soon, he found himself relaxing in the hot, bubbling waters of an outdoor Jacuzzi. A red-headed Baywatch babe that looked remarkably like his partner, cuddled up to him, rubbing her hand across his bare chest.

"Is this heaven?" he asked her.

"YOU tell me," she replied, licking her tongue along the side of his face.

Mulder moaned and sighed. "Well, maybe a little slice anyway."

The End

Hope you enjoyed. : )

Fran, aka Dynojet@aol.com

End  
file.